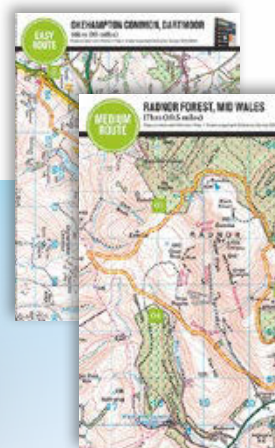


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Hidden gem trails from the South
Downs to the Scottish Cairngorms

Single-ring cranksets on test

How to set up clipless pedals

Best 26in mud tyres

Evil's first short-travel 29er

Women-specific Giant Intrigue

BIKE TEST

29ER TRAIL SLAYERS

Best of the big wheelers from
Canyon, Specialized & Cube

NEW SERIES!

SECRETS OF FASTER RIDING

DH star Brendan
Fairclough shares
his trail-riding tips



NEW BIKES BMC SPEEDFOX, LAPIERRE X-CONTROL, PINNACLE RAMEN



Coad Llandegla, North Wales | © Laurence Crossman-Emms





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zena

A great 3 season women's jersey for any mountain biker

- Worn by itself during Spring and Autumn or as a mid-layer in winter
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- Automatically equalizes positive and negative pressure for increased sensitivity.
- Fine-tunable air spring curve with air volume spacers.



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Good luck and good racing,

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ON THE COVER

Mountain guide
Andy McKenna on a
ride around Ballater
in the Cairngorms
Photographer:
Andy McCandlish



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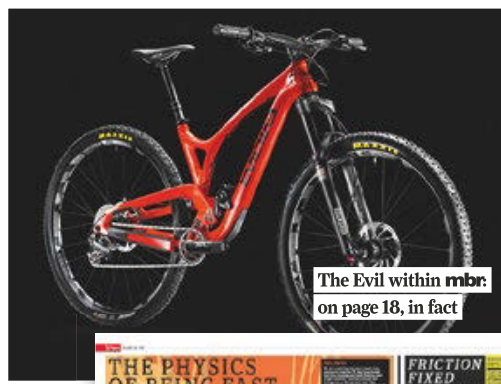
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EDITOR'S LETTER

That's progress

Why a back-to-basics trail centre offers an intriguing way forward

It's a common problem that when projects fail; they fail because there's no real clear vision for what they're meant to be — or, worse still, they're trying to be a bit of everything all at once.



Organically groomed:
the best of both worlds?

In this month's **mbr** (see page 72) there's an article about what should be a perfect example: Sutton Bank, an offshoot of Dalby Forest trail centre that positions itself somewhere between the 'out there' appeal of natural riding and the convenient appeal of a man-made development.

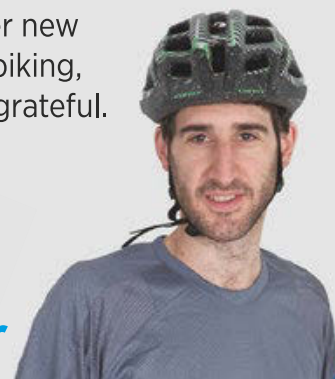
In other words: rights of way, with waymarking and bike hire.

It'd be easy to criticise Sutton Bank for what it's not. You don't get the rollercoaster thrills of finely honed machine-built trails, and you won't find anything as wild or technical as Lakeland singletrack, either.

What you will find, however, is an opportunity to ride in the great outdoors, far from towns, roads and modern life, and feel like you're exploring virgin territory.

For every ride that's a balls-out whoopfest, there's another that's more peaceful and — dare I say it — more grown-up. And as long as new projects offer new ways to enjoy mountain biking, we all have reason to be grateful.

Jim
Editor, **mbr**



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mbr

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mbr TODAY
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CHARGE 10LR**

Turn to page 62

WORTH
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KONA PRECEPT

At Kona we're proud of our ability to create mountain bikes that create mountain bikers while allowing existing riders to expand their horizons. Our Precept line is distilled from the Process and Operator lines to give any rider a solid and super-affordable chassis to ride it all and ride it well. For 2015 the Precepts return, keen to convert many more to the church of rip-roaring, dual-suspension mountain biking.



konaworld.com
www.konaworld.com/trailds



Big picture

“Valleys drop, mountains rise, lift your head, breathe the skies.” The morning sunrise spills over the land, bathing the trail in golden light for a morning descent from the peaks of Canada’s Kootenays down into the peaceful town of Nelson. This was my first trip there and, with memories like this, I can’t wait to go back.

Mark Mackay



Big picture

Nan Bield: it's a classic. Weekend or evening, it never fails to deliver. Flat-out loose singletrack to technical rock-strewn switchbacks, it has it all. Sam Needham threads the needle before shouldering his neon steed up the midway hike-a-bike. This infamous Lakeland loop is now drawing people away from trail centres to test their skills, not just against the terrain, but also the elements. Gather a gang, grab a bag full of warm clothing and get yourself out for an epic!

Sam Flanagan



Big picture

You don't get a lot of daylight for your money in winter up north, and at 2pm in Ballater the sun is already making its excuses and dipping behind the surrounding hills. Andy McKenna and Richard Watts are just rounding up the last of a singletrack ridge above town, and this gnarly Caledonian pine signals the final drop down the classic Green Mile trail to the River Dee.

Andy McCandlish

SCOTT GENIUS



NO SHORTCUTS

We didn't make your bike so you can talk about it. Or look at it. Or tinker with it. We made your bike so you can forget about it. Because when it's just you on the kind of trail that makes your heart pump so loud you can hear it, the best bikes are the ones that disappear, and let you experience the thrill.



“JIM SHOUTS,
'STAY RIGHT!'
OR WAS IT
LEFT? THE PATH
SPLITS... IT'S
DECISION TIME”

Keep your ears peeled, page 66

GEAR

RIDES

FAST & FIT

INSPIRATION

Edited by Jamie Darlow

GET STARTED

LIFT-OFF AT THE FOREST OF DEAN

The new Launch Pad downhill track was built with disabled riders in mind — but it's open to everyone

The Forest of Dean now has the UK's only trail designed specifically for four-wheel bikes, after the Launch Pad downhill track opened at the back end of last year.

Open to two wheels as well as four, the new track has been built for the Rough Riderz downhill club, meaning it will flow well with no pedalling, or even pumping, required. The club helps disabled and able-bodied riders alike get off-road on four-wheeled bikes. Watch out on the tabletops though — they have quite a kick.

“It's purely gravity-fed, so it's all about keeping the flow and momentum,” explained Alan Grist from Dean Trail

Volunteers, who helped coordinate the Architrail build at Pedalabikeaway in Cannop, Gloucestershire.

Alan told us the Launch Pad rides perfectly as a beginner's trail because it's smooth and fast: “It's a bit faster than you might anticipate on two wheels but it's essentially a blue trail.

“Next year we're going to have more funding for more technical sections, rock gardens and drops and more rooty features,” he said. There are also plans to extend the trail and to run another down the hill alongside the Launch Pad later in the year.



Launch Pad: great for two wheels or four

BAD (MEANING GOOD)

Evil's new short-travel 29er, The Following, looks like pure goodness to us

We never thought we'd see the day that Evil Bikes, a brand known for its 26in downhill bikes, unveiled a new, short-travel 29er.

Consider our minds boggled then, by the release of The Following, a 120mm-travel bike with aggressive geometry, big wheels and a carbon frame. It costs plenty (frame and shock, £2,399; complete bikes from £4,799) — which presumably explains why money is the root of all evil — but by god do we want one.

The Following uses a variant of the Dave Weagle-designed Delta system found on Evil's The Undead downhill bike, a bike made popular by World Cup racer Stevie Smith before he moved to Devinci. This version may be scaled-down in travel, but it still lets you adjust the geometry via a 'flip chip'. High and low settings tweak the height of the BB, the angles and the wheelbase measurement. There are also adjustable headset cups to further slacken or steepen the head angle by around a degree.

We really like the neat little touches, such as internal cable routing, a sag-meter set into the main pivot (30 per cent sag recommended) and shock set-up guidance on the website. The Following comes either as a frame and RockShox Monarch RT3 Debonair shock or in two complete builds, X01 or X1. UK distributor silverfish-uk.com should have bikes available now.



Full carbon frame, with internal routing — although curiously the rear derailleur and rear brake run externally under the top tube

Delta system suspension with redesigned dog bone links to increase stiffness, delivering 120mm of travel through a RockShox Monarch RT3 shock

6
OF THE
BEST

26in
MUD
TYRES

BEST FOR XC
BONTRAGER
MUD X, £39.99
bontrager.com

The Mud X is skinny, perfect if you've got tight frame clearances and ride in claggy conditions. It's grippy and cuts through the mud well, plus it's very light and would make a great XC choice.



BEST FOR UPLIFTS
HUTCHINSON
TORO ENDURO,
£45.99
extrauk.co.uk

The enduro offers amazing grip and a great profile, capable of digging in slippery trails. It's heavy, so use the uplift day or proper mountains when you need grip and protection.



BEST FOR PROTECTION
MAXXIS
MEDUSA, £32.99
maxxis.co.uk

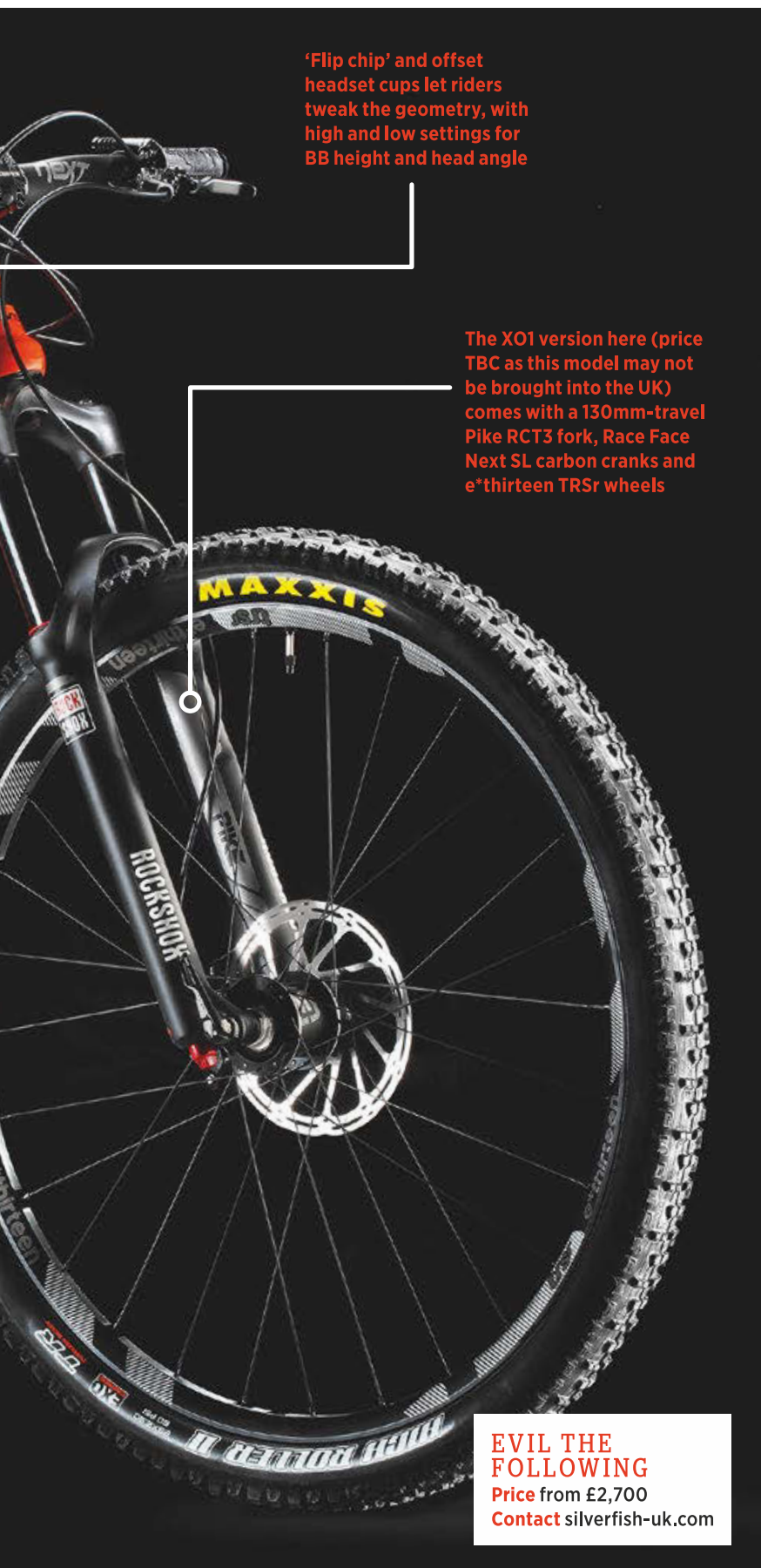
Widely spaced knobs to clear mud and a skinnier size than the 2.1in tag suggests, make the Medusa more legend than myth. Get the Silkworm version with the puncture-resistant layer.



BEST FOR ALL WEATHER
ONZA GREINA,
FROM £29.95
silverfish-uk.com

Superfast rolling thanks to shallow lugs, the Greina still manages to deliver good grip thanks to the soft compound. It's not a full-on mud tyre but great for winter trail centre rides.





'Flip chip' and offset headset cups let riders tweak the geometry, with high and low settings for BB height and head angle

The XO1 version here (price TBC as this model may not be brought into the UK) comes with a 130mm-travel Pike RCT3 fork, Race Face Next SL carbon cranks and e*thirteen TRS wheels

EVIL THE FOLLOWING
Price from £2,700
Contact silverfish-uk.com

BEST FOR DEEP MUD

PANARACER TRAILRAKER,
£42.99

zyro.co.uk

The Trailraker has always had incredible amounts of grip, let down by deformation at low pressures. Now it's available as a UST version, it'll hold its shape better and let you drop the psi below 30.

BEST FOR TRAILS

SPECIALIZED STORM CONTROL,
£30

specialized.com

Our favourite mud tyre is skinny to cut through mud and tacky to grip slick roots. There's not much cushioning, so come summer you'll want something for higher speeds.

COIL SHOCKS BOUNCE BACK

Move over air, coil shocks could be the newest (and oldest) technology making it onto our bikes in 2015

Based just south of Vicenza in Italy, Extreme Racing Shox has been building dampers for cars for over five decades. Franco Frattton is the man in charge and has worked with racers of the highest calibre — including Sébastien Loeb in WRC and Mika Hakkinen in F1.

Now the company has put its name to dampers for mountain bikes, with Dave Garland, Danny Hart's former mechanic, testing and tuning the new Storia on World Cup-level downhill terrain. Two coil shocks have been developed, including the Storia designed for 150-170mm enduro bikes and driven by the booming EWS race scene.

Dave said he expects to see many more top-level enduro riders racing on coil shocks this season, as the massive demands long DH stages place on equipment can overcome even the best modern air shocks.

Around 750g complete, the Storia is heavier than equivalent air shocks using a reservoir, but its designers

are banking on an extra dimension in the ride performance from its intricate piston design and sustained performance to overcome the weight difference.

A key principle behind the internal design is the low nitrogen pressure it runs — around 30psi rather than the 200psi typical of non-coil air shocks. This means the shock has high bump sensitivity to provide better comfort and tracking. This should be something that translates to better grip and rider control in the hardest terrain. Mindful of the need for pedalling efficiency for racing, the Storia also uses a titanium inertia valve, designed by Frattton to stop the bike wallowing.

Future plans include a bar-mounted, Bluetooth-activated hydraulic lockout, which sounds exciting.

There's a lot to delve into, so we've sourced a shock for test and can't wait to try it — we'll let you know if coil shocks can still deliver potential advantages for all-mountain and enduro riders.

EXT STORIA SHOCK

Price £600 (including two springs and free first service)

Contact stendecworks.com

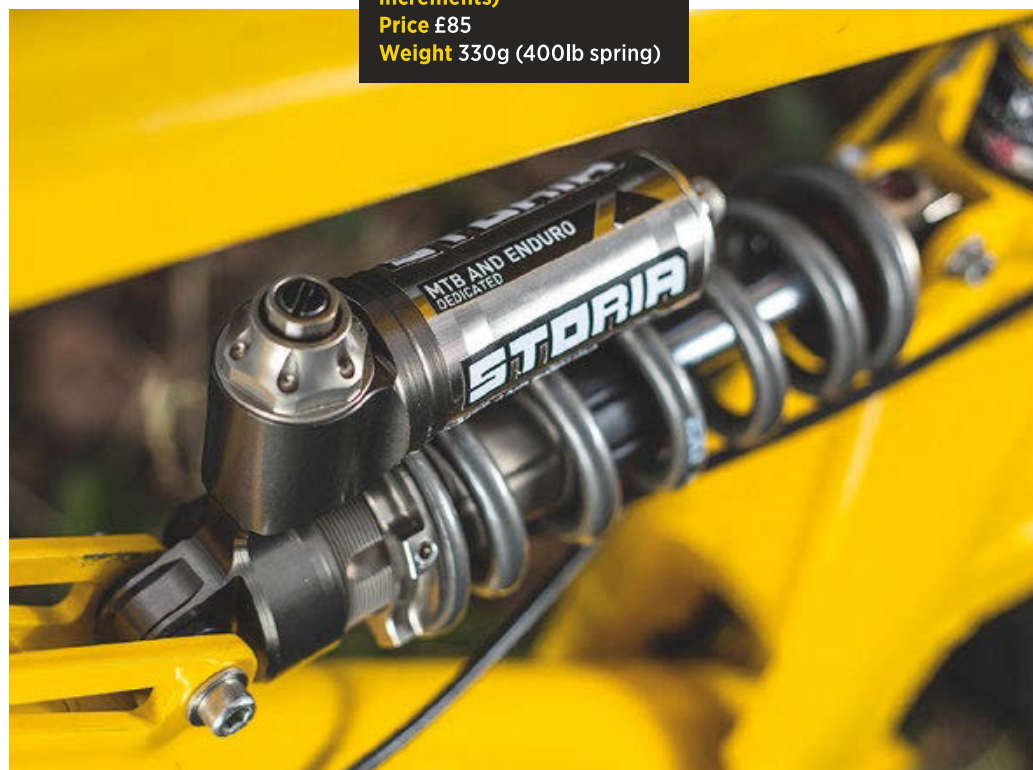
Weight 430g without spring

EXT SPRINGS

225lb to 450lb (in 25lb increments)

Price £85

Weight 330g (400lb spring)



WIN A SHIMANO UNZEN 15 PACK

Keep up to date with the latest mtb news, videos, bikes, gear and great places to ride with our fortnightly digital newsletter.

Each month we're also giving away a Shimano Unzen 15 hydration pack, worth £89.99 from Madison.co.uk. All you need to

do is sign up to the newsletter at po.st/news1 to be in with a chance of winning.

WORTH £89.99



HOT STUFF

WHAT WE'RE EXCITED ABOUT THIS MONTH

**MOST
WANTED**

ROCKSHOX REBA RL £460

The appeal of the 2015 Reba RL isn't just the great price — it has a level of adjustment and sophistication that we've only seen previously on top-end suspension forks. The fact that it looks totally bad-ass with its black lowers and stanchions is a bonus, too.

In terms of hierarchy, the Reba RL sits between the XC-specific SID and the more trail-orientated Revelation. It has the same magnesium lowers as the SID but gets a tapered steerer, hollow-forged aluminium crown and 32mm alloy stanchions.

The damper is the Motion Control RL, which has Rapid Recovery rebound, low-speed compression and a simple on-off lockout. In the opposite leg there is a Solo air spring but the big news is what you can't see.

RockShox has added Bottomless Tokens, just like those in the Pike, to allow you to modify the spring curve and increase the progression and ramp-up. The upshot is that you can run a softer spring for increased small-bump compliance and grip, but with extra support for riding hard or dropping into steeper trails.

The number of installed tokens from the factory depends on the fork travel. The 120mm Reba doesn't have any installed as standard, but RockShox fits one token for every 10mm of travel under 120mm, so, for example, a 100mm fork will have two tokens fitted.

The new tokens are also compatible with the 2015 SID, Revelation, RS-1 and the fat-wheeled Bluto forks. RockShox even sells a kit that includes a new threaded air cap and five Tokens, so you can also upgrade older 32mm forks too. Price for this kit is around £25.

If you want a short-travel fork that's absolutely blinding value, look no further than the new RockShox Reba RL.

sram.com





DIRTY BEADS

With micro-particles to get into all the nooks and crannies, Muc-Off's Nano Grit Hand Cleaner is great for removing ingrained dirt and bike grime. It even contains a moisturiser so your hands stay baby soft. **£10, muc-off.com**



DRY BAG

If you want to keep your phone dry you could use a simple zip-loc bag, but the Ortlieb Waterproof case is nicer, waterproof to over a metre, and has a touchscreen panel so you can use the phone while it's inside. **£25, ortlieb.com**



SEVENTH HEAVEN

Beautifully finished and cut like a Savile Row suit, the 7Mesh Revelation jacket represents the haute couture of outdoor clothing. It features advanced Gore-Tex Pro fabric, a removable hood and weighs just 270g. **£339, 7meshinc.com**



APE HANGER

Azonic's new in-your-face neon yellow Big Foot Pedal features a massive 120x110mm platform, 10 pins per side, a low-profile 12mm forged aluminum body and stiff cromoly construction. Also available in black. **£99.99, oneal.eu**



TRAIL ALE

At seven per cent, the Saddle Black dark beer carries a punch, but the 'cycling-friendly' craft brewery Purity makes it so it's probably good for you. Tastes good too. **£20.20 per pack of 12 or £1.90 a bottle, puritybrewing.com**



CLAMP DOWN

For riders rocking externally routed dropper posts, the new Hope Dropper Seat Clamp has a built-in spherical guide that keeps the cable snug against the frame. You can even remove it if you upgrade to stealth routing. **£25, hopetech.com**



EVERLASTING PADS

Uberbike has launched a range of replacement disc brake pads with built-in cooling fins. But with a replaceable braking surface, you don't have to bin the whole lot when they wear out. **£13.99 (pad inserts £8.99 per pair), uberbikecomponents.com**



TANGO TOP

Take a traditional road jersey, extremely soft and temperature-regulating merino wool and give it a contemporary twist, and you get the Vulpine Alpine jersey. Includes a full-length zip and three useful rear pockets. **£99, vulpine.cc**



RUBBER KING

With input from 1993 DH World Champ Mike King, Vee Tyres is new to the UK and offers 27.5 and 29in rubber for trail rippers. The Crown F is an aggressive, High Roller-style front and the Crown R is a quick-rolling rear. **£36-42, veetireco.co.uk**

IN AT THE STEEP

*Go careful with the front brake —
these trails put the ‘rad’ into gradient*

NAN BIELD, LAKE DISTRICT 16km (10 miles)



STEEP



ROCKY



TECHY

One of the more user-friendly Lakeland passes, Nan Bield is great because the steep bits are spiced up with a couple of tight switchbacks. The shortest meaningful loop starts at Sadgill (Landranger 97, NY483057) and clambers north over Gatesgarth as a warm-up. It then turns tail to penetrate deep into a spectacular inner sanctum that conceals the scenic tarn of Small Water. From here it's a carry, but it's worth it. Grab a drink and a bite in the shelter at the top. Then drop the seatpost, clip in and concentrate. Technique is everything here. Return east over Stile End.

GPS download: po.st/nanbield



CAPEL MOUNTH, EASTERN HIGHLANDS 27km (17 miles)



STEEP



BOGGY

If ever there was an unlikely bit of steep singletrack it's this one. The climb from Loch Muick (Landranger 44, NO284758) offers no hint at all of what you're about to receive. But as you crest the top, you become very aware of a big drop between your front wheel and the floor of Glen Clova. Duplex turns to singletrack and gravity swaps sides. It's steep, twisty and fun. Start at Glen Cova, head north-west up Glen Doll then east to Loch Muick. Take the Capel Road south from there.

GPS download: po.st/capel

GREAT FRYUP DALE, NORTH YORK MOORS 18km (14 miles)



STEEP



TECHY

The North York Moors isn't known for its steep, techie trails and this makes Great Fryup all the better. It starts innocuously (Landranger 94, NZ710086) but quickly plummets, and exposed sandstone steps replace the peaty dirt you're accustomed to. It's tight at the top, and balancy; after that it's a succession of steep steps with no shortage of exposure. From Danby, take trails and road south to Danby Head. Head east past Trough House then north for main event. Retrace the opening trail.

GPS download: po.st/fryup

ELAN VALLEY, POWYS 22km (10 miles)



STEEP



BOGGY

The drop to the Carreg-ddu Reservoir plunges almost straight down the flanks of one of those typical vertiginously sided Mid Wales valleys. It's tight, twisty, rough and it's also very steep in places. From Rhayader (Landranger 147, SN966677) head east, leaving the B4518 and climbing on lane and trail to Y Clog Fawr. Plummet, then go north to Craig Goch dam and west over Esgair Perfedd. Head north onto Penrhiw-wen and enjoy a long descent south-west to finish.

GPS download: po.st/elan

END



WORTHY WOOD, EXMOOR 15km (9 miles)



Exmoor has plenty of steep, woody trails but Worthy Wood, above Porlock, stands out as one of the best. Head west from Porlock (Landranger 181, SS885468) on bridleways, zigzag up into Worthy Wood, then traverse for 1km before descending to the Weir. Take the toll up again and continue south-west to the A39, which you cross. Continue to Hawkcombe Head and cross the road to take the singletrack bridleway down Hawkcombe.

GPS download: po.st/worthy

ADVENTURES IN ALTITUDE

Get wild this year with the Adventure Cross Series

Fancy riding something a little out of the ordinary in 2015? Something that takes you into the mountains of Britain, through the wilds, and covers more miles than most of us would normally tick off in a month. If that's whetted your appetite then 2015's Adventure Cross series will satisfy it, delivering monster views on a mix of bridleway, trail and country lanes. Enduro it ain't, endurance it most definitely is.

There are five organised rides on offer in the Adventure Cross 2015 Series, stretching from Margam Park in South Wales to Galloway in Scotland. The routes are all marked and complemented by feed stops along the way, and there's a

catered event village waiting for you at the end of the ride too.

The routes cover upward of 60 hilly miles, so a hardtail or cyclo-cross bike is your best bet. The Lakeland Monster Miles in Cumbria is our pick of the bunch— 62 miles with 2,781m of climbing and views of the Skiddaw Massif all the way round.

Go to bookmyride.co.uk for entry (£35) and full details.

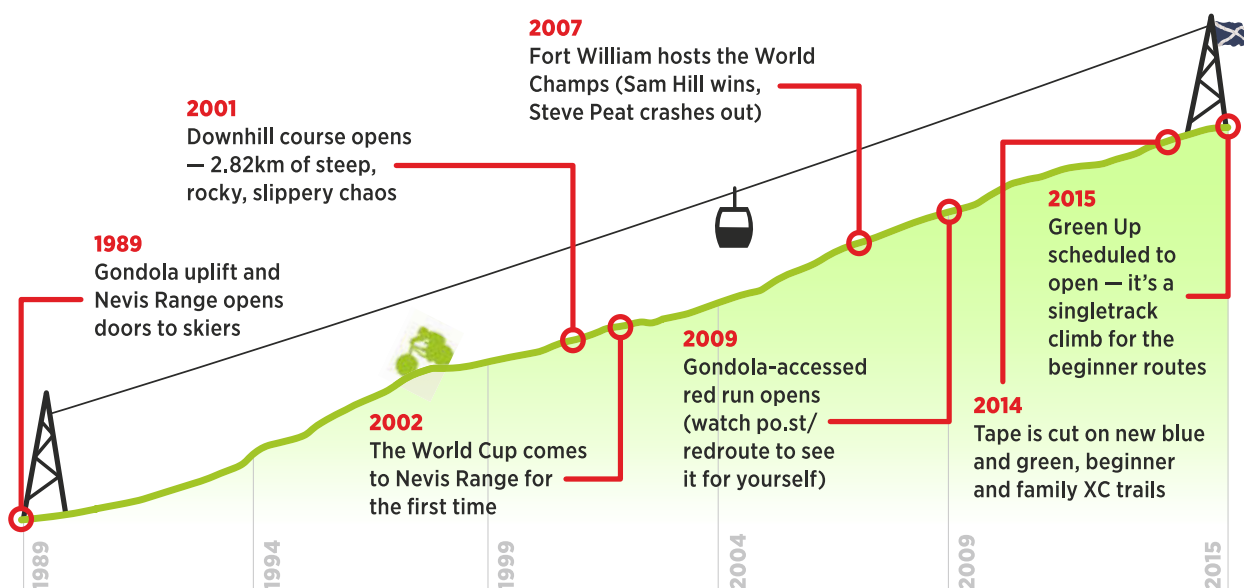
EVENT	EVENT CENTRE	DATE
Moors & Shores	Dalby Forest, N. Yorkshire	Sunday April 12
Afan Avenger NEW!	Margam Park, South Wales	Sunday May 10
Peak District Pioneer NEW!	Bakewell Showground, Derbyshire	Sunday July 26
Galloway Gallop	Kirroughtree MTB Centre, Dumfries, Scotland	Sunday Sept 20
Lakeland Monster Miles	Fitz Park, Keswick, Cumbria	Sunday October 4



Try something different in 2015

HAPPY BIRTHDAY BEN

Nevis Range is 25 years old! Here's a history of the DH World Cup-hosting venue in a nutshell...



THE PHYSICS OF BEING FAST

What makes a top downhill rider? Guts? Big lungs? Titanium knees? For the first time, scientists tell us exactly what we need to fully harness the power of gravity

SHORT-SPRINT TRAINING

If you're doing lots of anaerobic (short sprint) training — don't bother. "Despite the initial sprint in a DH event, anaerobic capacity is relatively unimportant," says Dr Jamie Macdonald, extreme sport scientist at Bangor University. It'd be better to spend your time improving other things, such as...

...AEROBIC (ENDURANCE) CAPACITY

The importance of this has been shown by two ingenious experiments. First, riders took part in a laboratory test, pedalling an ergometer until utterly exhausted while their vital signs were measured. A week later they took a competitive-style ride down the Nant Gwrtheyrn British Series course in Wales. Their efforts showed that elite DH riders have high aerobic capacities, and that riding a DH course has a surprisingly high aerobic demand, even though in DH you pedal for only half the time of the descent. The reason is...

TRY THIS
Nothing beats a turbo-trainer but if that's too much, shake things up a bit. Try riding 10% harder up one hill on your usual weekend loop

...YOU'RE USING UPPER BODY MUSCLE TO STABILISE THE BIKE

So says the good doctor and his postgraduate helpers. And don't expect your breathing to be calm and relaxed — you'll be using extreme breath control to stabilise your spine during crunch landings. You might not realise it but you'll be doing this with the Valsalva manoeuvre — attempting to breathe out forcibly but keeping your windpipe closed. Of course, one crucial attribute for controlling jumps and corners is...

TRY THIS
There's plenty you can do with body weight alone — try the simple press-up, it'll work your core, arms and back. Do 3x8 reps to begin

...HANDGRIP ENDURANCE

How long, how hard and how often can you squeeze those little levers and hang on to the bars? The human guinea pigs had their grip measured as soon as they'd finished the Nant Gwrtheyrn run. Those with the strongest were the fastest finishers. The final, and most important, characteristic of a top DH mountain biker is...

TRY THIS
Buy a hand-grip strengthener — we found one for just £2.49. A Powerball gyroscope is more fun though

THE STUDY

We can reveal all because seven experts, three coaches and more than 90 riders have donated their time, knowledge and bodily fluids to a team of sport scientists — and they've shared their findings with us. Want to know more? Read 'Characteristics explaining performance in downhill mountain biking' by Joel B. Chidley, Alexandra L. MacGregor, Caoimhe Martin, Calum Arthur, and Jamie H. Macdonald, po.st/dhscience

...SKILL

Yeah, you knew it — but how do you categorise the mish-mash of body movements? The seven deadly skills to work on, say the scientists, are body position, footwork, gaze focus, speed control, energy management, pressure control, and fluidity/line choice. Combined with handgrip endurance, skills account for a massive 73% of variance in DH performance. Self-belief and confidence help but they're small potatoes compared to skill and handgrip.

As ever, ego is no substitute for training.

TRY THIS
Skills training is pricy but very effective — go to po.st/skills to find a course near you. And keep reading the **mbr** Technique section

Illustration: Simon Scarsbrook

FRICITION FIXED

A common cause of post-ride pain is ITB friction. Here's what it is, and how to banish it for good

After a long day on the trails, your post-ride buzz is being curtailed by nagging pain and tenderness across the outer part of the thigh, high up close to the hip but also extending down as low as the outer side of the knee. Sound familiar? You're probably suffering from iliotibial band (ITB) friction — but don't suffer in silence, diagnose it and fix it.

SYMPTOMS

When the lower insertion of the IT band becomes inflamed, it causes 'runner's knee'. Ignore the name, this well-known condition doesn't discriminate between disciplines. The resulting lateral knee joint pain can be severe, even when walking downhill or downstairs. The range of movement in your knee is usually unimpaired, though you may notice moderate joint swelling, and you'll probably need a couple of weeks off the bike. IT band pain can afflict seasoned and new riders alike, since there are multiple causes, and symptoms can worsen rapidly.

CAUSES

Many factors can contribute towards ITB friction, but most commonly it's caused by overuse. Often the problem is a muscle imbalance, where some muscle groups (hip flexors, quadriceps) have become too tight, while others (hip abductors and extensors) have weakened. The syndrome occurs when the band rubs across the lateral femoral epicondyle, a bony prominence of the outer femur — twice per pedal revolution (160 crossings per minute at a pedalling cadence of 80rpm). As the knee repeatedly flexes and extends, the band becomes inflamed.

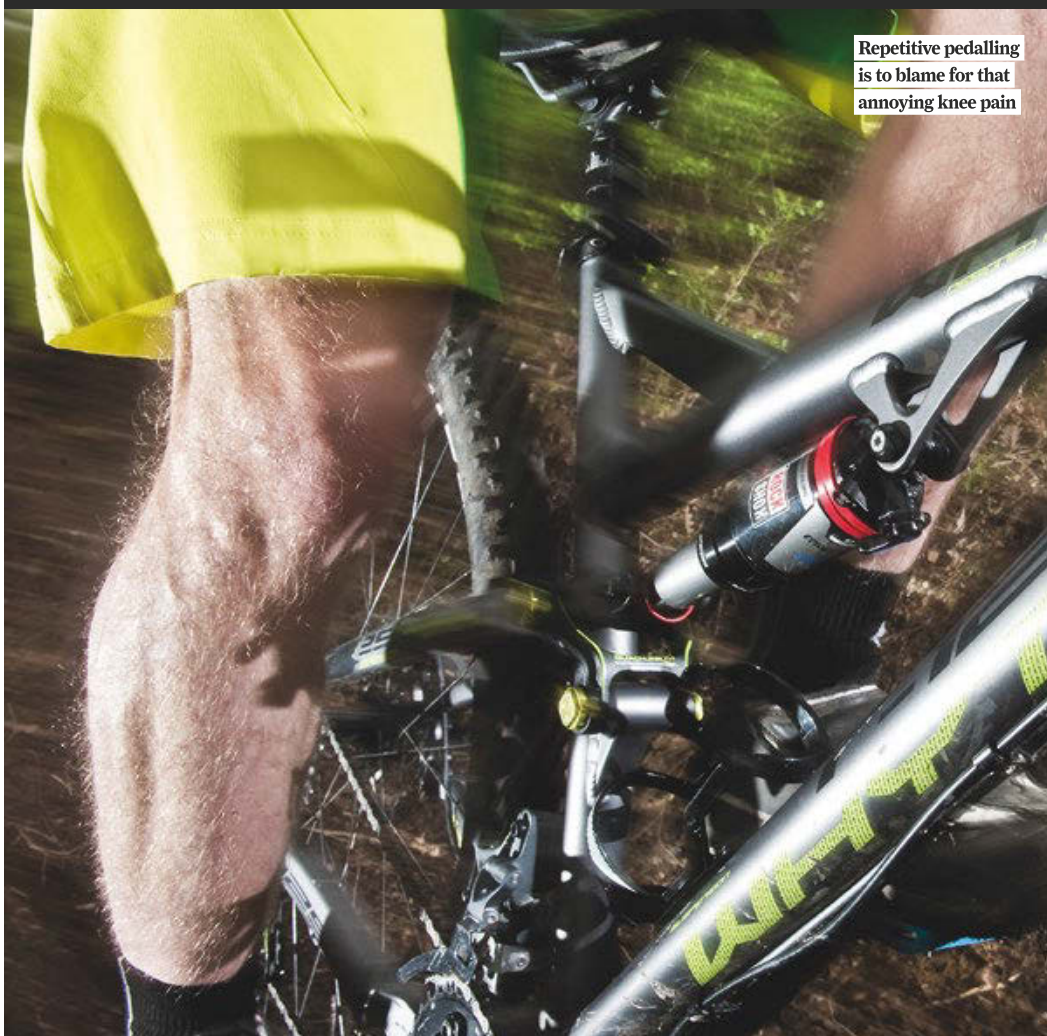
REHAB

Stretch the ITB, and use a foam roller to massage the ITB, quadriceps and hip flexors. Those weaker hip muscles (extensors, abductors and external rotators) may need strengthening too.

YOUR EXPERT

LEWIS WOOD

Lewis is a physio and osteopath, specialising in musculoskeletal therapy and sports injuries



Repetitive pedalling is to blame for that annoying knee pain

SAY IT WITH A CHEST BUMP

Fist bump, high five, hearty handshake? The etiquette of celebration



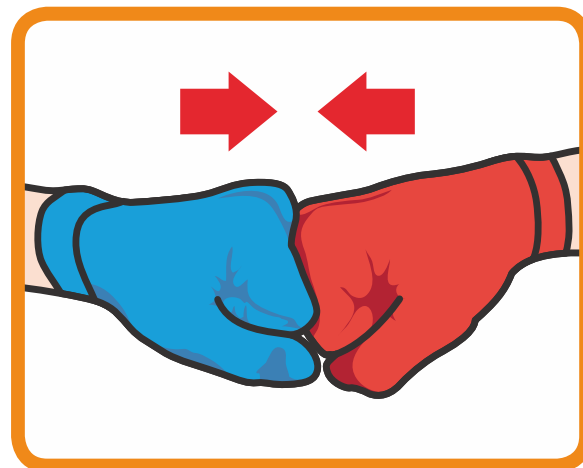
WRY SMILE AND A LIFT OF THE EYEBROWS

■ **Use it when...** you've been shown a new trail by a proud local, but it wasn't all that and you know you've got 10 trails back home way sicker!



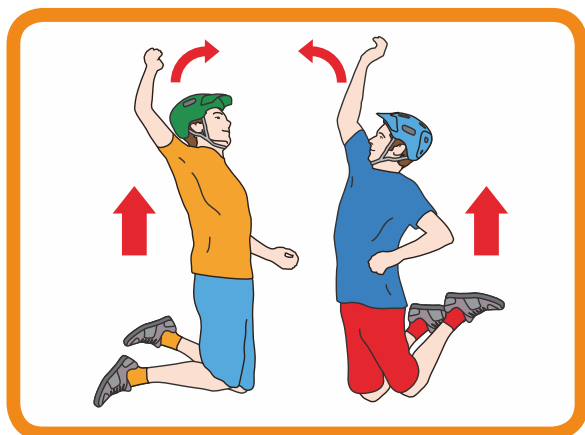
BIG GRIN OR POSSIBLE SPONTANEOUS 'WOOOP'

■ **Use it when...** you've just nailed the first decent trail of your ride and got a stoke on. Add a possible "shall we ride that again?", especially if a friend has struggled on it or been scared.



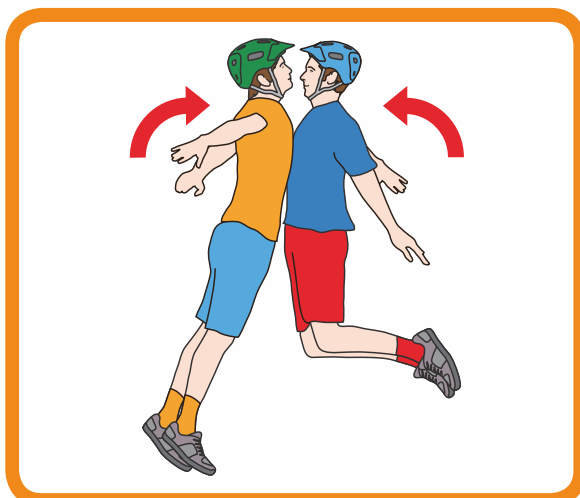
FIST BUMP, AKA 'BROFIST'

■ **Use it when...** you're respectful of someone else's riding — maybe they've just done a jump you wussed out on. This shows you're not jealous. Also useful when meeting a new riding chum — it's more hygienic, they might've just used the bushes.



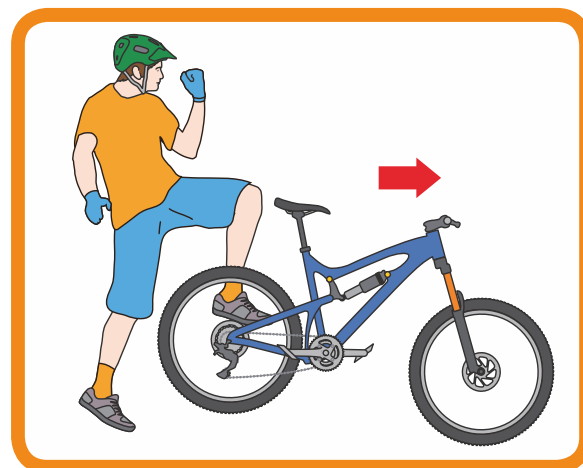
HIGH FIVE, WITH OPTIONAL JUMP 'SET-UP'

■ **Use it when...** you've ridden something amazing or frightened yourself silly and survived. Don't be afraid to hype up that 5ft table into a 30ft gap when you retell it.



THE CHEST BUMP

■ **Use it when...** you've successfully negotiated the Red Bull Hardline (see here, po.st/hardline), or ticked off an 80ft stepdown at Rampage.



'GHOST' THE BIKE DOWN THE TRAIL AND REPEATEDLY FIST-PUMP THE AIR

■ **Use it when...** you've won the World Cup... or landed a '360 Quad Truckdriver' — po.st/darkness

3 WAYS TO BEAT WINTER

Three of the best cold weather warmers for you and your bike

SEALSKINZ THIN MID-LENGTH SOCK £30

sealskinz.com

Keeping your feet warm in winter is mostly about keeping them dry. These are light enough to wear into spring and paired with Shimano DX shoes make great mud defenders.



ROCKGUARDZ MUDGUARDZ £45.50

rockguardz.com

Keep the mud off your legs, your body and out of your eyes with the best mudguard in the business — max coverage, min weight. The Guardz hugs your front wheel and stops the crud.



SCOTT TRAIL MTN 20 JACKET £169.99

scott-sports.com

With a fleece-lined collar, hood and waterproof shell, the MTN is built for proper winter use. And at just 300g, it packs down easily to double up as a summer just-in-case stowaway jacket.



NEVER SECOND GUESS YOUR FIRST INSTINCT



01 

SHIFTING SYSTEMS

Di2 / MECHANICAL

Two options, one precise shifting system. Available in mechanical or Di2, you can shift with ease, in all conditions and circumstances. The perfect gear is always at your control at any crucial moment.

02 

DRIVETRAIN SYSTEMS

1x11 / 2x11 / 3x11

XTR delivers drivetrain options for your individual riding style, whether it's 1x11, 2x11 or 3x11, a wide-range cassette gives you the right gear to tackle long climbs or pass your friends on a technical descent.

03 

BRAKING SYSTEMS

XC RACE / TRAIL

With Shimano Ice Technologies, XC Race & Trail brakes provide confident braking through high power and superior modulation to conquer your daily ride with control.

REINVENTING THE WHEEL

What comes around goes around — here are some ‘new’ ideas that are as old as the hills

OVAL CHAINRINGS

These are eccentric, in both senses, so it's not surprising they go back to Edwardian times, the golden age of bicycle



invention. Seven decades later mountain bikes appeared in the UK and, within weeks, a complex oval Shimano Biopace chainset made its debut on an off-road frame. It was at the first rural commercial event, the ATB Expo at Small Dole, Sussex, in 1984, where DJ John Peel (RIP) ran the PA. Bizarre music choices aside, the Biopace was on a unique frame built by English Cycles of Telford but it never quite captured the imagination. Nevertheless, it seems that even though they're not round, they'll keep coming round — Rotor, MRP and Absolute Black now make mtb versions.

29ERS

How old is the 29er? Five years? Ten years? If you'd been walking the Chilterns 33 years ago, you'd have seen a man in tweeds and a flat cap pootling through the mud on a tall Cleland Aventura shod with 29in Hakkapeliitta snow tyres imported from Finland. He was Geoff Apps, freelance bike designer, and the tyres were the only ones of that diameter he could find in the world. They were so difficult to source they never caught on. Pity. The company that made them might have become successful. It was called Nokia.



FULL SUSPENSION

All the techie innovations of mtbs come from motocross, right? Wrong. The first all-round solution for softening the off-road ride came from cars. Dr Alex Moulton took the rubber suspension system he'd invented for the Mini and put it on the rear of a 20in wheel version of his step-through AM Series separable space-frames, all of which had sprung front suspension. The AM-ATB was handbuilt in small numbers in Bradford on Avon as long ago as 1988 but production ended in 1992. If you see one in a barn, grab it — it's collectible.

MATES' MEETS

Brighton Big Dog is a contemporary antidote to the big glitzy mudfests. It has community spirit and no profit targets. Each rider's main goal is to survive to the end so they can drink the free beer at the after-show beach party. This welcome divergence from the scramble for success may have been founded in 2009 but it harks back to mtb's primordial era of the Fat Tyre Five, the Wendover Bash and the Mountain Bike Club national series in the 1980s, when riders were trusted to observe the only rule: "Don't cheat."



MATERIAL DIFFERENCE

The mega-makers have invested so much in aluminium and carbon fibre frames, they'll be making them for years to come. And that's fine because they are making some great bikes. But peek around the curtain and you'll see something different. Another material, with different tube diameters and a different ride. It's called steel. Is it new? The clue is in who's using it. For example, Chris Chance. He's making the Fat Chance. Again. He used to make them when Ronald Reagan worried the world. He used steel then. He's using it now — you can buy one on Kickstarter.

2015 NEW MTB's NOW ON SALE



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MOT FOR YOUR BRAKES

Brakes not powerful enough? Levers spongy like cheese strings? Don't buy new ones before you try these tips...

SHORTEN YOUR HOSES

Brakes are simple in operation: squeezing the lever pushes fluid along a hose to the caliper where pistons force the pads against a steel rotor. Some of this hydraulic power can be lost through the hose, which expands a little under the pressure. Keep yours as short as possible by cutting away any excess length. The concept is the same on all brakes — detach the hose from the lever end, remove the barb or olive that holds it into the lever body, shorten it with a cable cutter and thread it back together.

One-finger braking enhances control

LEVER POSITION

Struggling for power or modulation? Start searching for the solution here. Line up the blades so you're just using one finger, pulling near the end of the lever. You'll have the most power this way, and also the most control. While you're at it, use the reach adjustment to bring the blade into the bar, close enough to get maximum power but not so close that it closes on your hand. If your brakes have any contact-point adjustment, dial it so there's just a little 'float' before the pads bite.

BLEED YOUR BRAKES

Ideally, the internals of your brakes should be filled with brake fluid and nothing else — but air often finds its way in and reduces the power and consistency. For guidance on flushing them out, look on the **mbr** website and find the right workshop video for your brakes: mbr.co.uk/mountain-bike-videos/workshop

BUY BIGGER ROTORS

The most expensive fix, but upsizing can make a dramatic difference if your bike comes with piddly little 160mm rotors. Bikes often get fitted with a smaller rotor at the rear and a larger one at the front, which makes no sense to us. A more powerful brake on the front wheel, on steep, slippery terrain — no thanks! Upsize your rotors so they match and buy a caliper adapter too.

BUY NEW BRAKE PADS

Organic (made from resin) pads offer the most power in dry conditions, but wear out more quickly than sintered metal pads. The latter are also better in wet conditions but have an unfortunate tendency to squeal. Your choice...

CLEAN YOUR ROTORS & PADS

Whip the wheels out of the bike, remove the pads and inspect the rotors and pads for grime or damage. If the rotors are straight and the pads have plenty of material left, clean them up with a fresh rag and solvent. You can buy dedicated disc brake cleaner, but if you're a keen camper (or very keen alcoholic) you might have some meths lying around that'll work just fine. If they don't bite properly after this clean up they're probably contaminated with chain lube, Miracle shine, silicone spray or something like it. Don't try and salvage them — they need to be replaced.



T-130

TRAIL SUSPENSION 650b

New for 2015, the T-130 is the latest in a long and illustrious line of Whytes that let you go anywhere, ride anything and have maximum fun along the way. Boasting 130mm of QUAD-4 suspension travel, mid-sized 650b wheels and Whyte's groundbreaking trail bike geometry, the T-130 is fast and fun on the trails you ride from your front door, whilst never feeling out of its depth when you travel further afield, be it to the trail centres of Wales and Scotland or even the Alps.

However you like to ride, in the T-130 you'll discover a bike that's as versatile as a Swiss army knife, and that quickly becomes a trusted companion for a lifetime of adventure, wherever the trail takes you.



T-130 WORKS £2999 13kg



T-130 S £2299 13.5kg



T-130 SX £1999 13.7kg



whyte.bike





FOX





FOXY XR - £3,199



FOXY R - £2,799



FOXY - £2,299



- Award Winning Forward Geometry
- 140mm rear suspension travel
- 27.5" wheels
- Super-efficient Zero suspension

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First rides

SWINGING A LEG OVER WHAT



BMC SPEEDFOX SF02 XT

£2,835 / 29in / evanscycles.com

NEED TO KNOW

- All new 130mm-travel trail bike with 29in wheels
- Full 2x10 Shimano XT groupset, including brakes
- Bridges the gap between the Fourstroke and Trailfox
- Five models to choose from

BMC underlines its commitment to 29in wheels with its new range of mid-travel trail bikes

BMC is short for Bicycle Manufacturing Company. Granted, it's not the most inspired name for a bike brand, but BMC's bikes are anything but dull. Take the new Speedfox SF02, for example. While most brands are working double-time to pump out on-trend 650b bikes, BMC is moving in the opposite direction, releasing yet another 29er.

It's a bold move, but if you take a closer look at the BMC range it makes perfect sense; the new 130mm-travel Speedfox filling the gap between the Fourstroke XC race bike and BMC's enduro bike, the 150mm-travel Trailfox — both of which roll on 29in wheels.

So BMC has stuck to its guns on the benefits of 29in wheels, but the Speedfox

brings about a distinct shift within the brand to offer more affordable bikes. The racing elite are still catered for with the XTR-equipped full-carbon Speedfox, but the range has been expanded down to include more competitively priced bikes like the aluminium Speedfox SF03 for £2,070.00. And there's everything in between. At the product launch in Switzerland I got to try the mid-range SF02 XT. Sporting a carbon front end and alloy rear, it really does have a foot in both camps.

It's great to see BMC expanding the size range beyond S, M and L to include XL and XS options. And with a tape measure in one hand and a 55mm stem in the other I opted to ride the size L with my own stem fitted, even though the size medium felt OK with the stock 70mm stem. The decision to go



Full XT drivetrain makes for shifting that's slick and quick



Speedfox: eager descender hobbled by overactive suspension



APS link rocker features sag indicator

SPOTLIGHT ON...

BMC's APS rear suspension

Combined with the Fox Float CTD rear shock, the APS twinlink suspension on the Speedfox delivers 130mm of travel. The layout bears more than a passing resemblance to the Giant Maestro and DW-Link designs, but that's not to say they are the same; the length and orientation of the links guaranteeing that the BMC has its own flavour. One thing that all three designs benefit from is the additional stiffness of the fully-triangulated rear end. The pivot hardware on the BMC is sleek and there's even an integrated sag indicator to make shock set-up easier.

SPECIFICATION

Frame Carbon/aluminium, 130mm travel
Shock Fox Float CTD Evolution
Fork Fox 32 Float CTD Evolution, 130mm travel
Wheels DT Swiss M1700 Spline, Continental Mtn King/X King 2.2in tyres
Drivetrain Shimano XT 2x10 chainset, XT mechs and shifters
Brakes Shimano XT 180mm
Components BMC, RockShox Reverb Stealth, Fizik Nisene XS
Sizes XS, S, M, L, XL
Weight 12.7kg (27.9lb) (Claimed)

GEOMETRY

Size ridden L
Rider height 5ft 11in
Head angle 68.5°
Seat angle 74°
BB height 335mm
Chainstay 435mm
Front centre 738mm
Wheelbase 1,171mm
Down tube 716mm
Top tube 630mm
Reach 455mm

bigger was for the most part influenced by the jagged peaks flanking the sleepy Swiss resort of Lenzerheide that we were about start our ascent from.

With the shorter stem fitted, all of the kit on the SFO2 XT looked sorted. There's no hidden cost saving in the spec, like a cheaper chain or low-end cassette, it's a full XT build. As such, shifting was seamless and accurate, no doubt aided by the direct-mount rear derailleur. I wasn't convinced that it was the perfect set-up for this bike, however. Crank hard or grind in the 38t chainring and the

BMC has stuck to its guns on the benefits of 29in wheels

suspension compresses all too readily, even when there are no bumps to gobble up. In fact, it's only when you run out of steam and drop down to the 28t chainring that the pedal response starts to feel tight and urgent. It's almost as if the layout of the suspension has been optimized for a 32t single ring — unfortunately that's not something Shimano currently offers.

Yes, you can always reach down and flick the CTD lever on the shock to Climb mode to firm things up on protracted ascents, but it's not ideal for punchy climbs or rolling terrain. There are benefits to having such active and plush rear suspension on a 130mm bike though, namely increased grip and being able to descend like a demon — as I quickly discovered doing laps of the red and blue runs in Lenzerheide bike park.

The superb Shimano XT brakes with 180mm rotors front and back gave me the confidence to take on the big terrain, safe in the knowledge that I could easily modulate

my speed and get out of trouble just as quickly as the 29er wheels got me into it. The chainstay-mounted guide worked a treat and while the Fox 32 Float fork was a little spindly for bike park shredding, the 2015 damping managed to keep in step with the rapid tempo. Factor in the relaxed geometry and relatively low BB height, and the Speedfox certainly lived up to its name on the descents.

Alan Muldoon

mbr 1ST IMPRESSION



HIGHS

Good geometry, great brakes and plush suspension make the Speedfox a rapid descender.



LOWS

Excessive suspension movement when climbing means you're constantly reaching for the CTD lever on the shock.



SPECIFICATION

Frame Supreme 6 alloy, FPS+ suspension, 100mm travel
Shock Lapierre R
Fork RockShox Recon Gold Solo Air, 120mm travel
Wheels Formula hubs, Mach1 Neo rims, Schwalbe Rapid Rob Performance 2.25in tyres
Drivetrain Shimano XT crankset and r-mech, Deore f-mech and shifters
Brakes Shimano Deore
Components Lapierre saddle and handlebar, Easton seatpost and stem
Sizes S, M, L, XL
Weight 13.4kg (29.5lb) (claimed)

GEOMETRY

Size ridden L
Rider height 6ft 1in
Head angle 68°
Seat angle 73.5°
BB drop 16mm
Chainstay 435mm
Top tube 610mm
Reach 435mm

LAPIERRE X-CONTROL 327

£1,749.99 / 650b / lapierre-bikes.co.uk

The X-Control's got a new frame, slacker geometry and mid-sized wheels but what's its raison d'être?

NEED TO KNOW

- With 100mm travel, the X-Control is Lapierre's shortest travel trail bike
- Reworked frame, with slacker trail-orientated angles and top-end alloy
- 650b replaces the 29er wheels of last year
- Mid-range model in a five-bike range: Prices start at £1,249.99 for the X-Control 127

Two years ago the X-Control was a 26in-wheeled bike. Last year it was a 29er. This year, Lapierre has decided the middle ground of 650b is the best option (or most on trend, perhaps) and adapted the bike to those wheels accordingly. I wonder if we'll see a fat bike version for 2016...

Never mind all that for now though, as we're looking here at the latest X-Control, with 100mm of rear travel paired with a 120mm fork up front. The frame is new for 2015, and all models are now made from the same alloy the French brand first used in its top-end downhill bikes. Lapierre says this Supreme 6 material is stronger and lighter than traditional 7005 aluminium.

Quite apart from the change in wheel size, the bike looks considerably different too. A gracefully curved top tube has replaced the old straight tube and triangular brace, and the down tube and seatstays now look bigger yet sleeker.

The suspension has been tweaked too, with new links and an extra 5mm travel.

X-Control: the wheels have shrunk along with the angles



Lapierre says this FPS+ system is more progressive with less pedal bob to contend with. The really big change over the old bike is the geometry, though, which is now relaxed and trail-friendly rather than edgy and XC-orientated — at 68° the head angle is a degree and a half slacker than the old bike.

However, I'm confused about who would choose this model over Lapierre's excellent

Zesty trail bike. With the geometry and travel changes, the X-Control has been focused on the trail to such an extent that you wouldn't really want to race on it. But you can buy the Zesty 329 for exactly the same money, it's only a pound heavier and it's got 20mm more travel. I haven't even started on the superior performance of the Zesty's OST+ suspension system, nor the fact that 29er wheels are better at this level of travel.

Of course, the spec is superior on the X-Control, with a Shimano XT drivetrain and rear derailleur, but those are the parts that wear out and get replaced, not the meat of the bike. In my opinion the X-Control would have been better left as a big-wheeler. I'm not saying it's bad; I'm just saying buy a Zesty instead.

Jamie Darlow

mbr

1ST IMPRESSION



HIGHS

The great frame and XT drivetrain. More travel than last year.



LOWS

Looks lacking against the Zesty.

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PINNACLE RAMEN 6

£1,500 / 29in / pinnacle-bikes.co.uk

Retail giant Evans Cycles shifts its focus towards the trails with the playful Ramen 6

NEED TO KNOW

- 29er trail hardtail from clicks-and-mortar giant, Evans Cycles
- Aluminium frame wedded to 120mm travel RockShox Reba fork
- 11-speed SRAM X1 drivetrain with single-ring

Read the marketing blurb accompanying most £1,500 hardtails and you'll probably notice an abundance of words around the theme of racing. Words such as 'podium', 'thoroughbred' and 'finish line', for example. Not so, though, with the Pinnacle Ramen 6, a bike for which the sales pitch actually uses the word 'fun'. Twice. That Pinnacle — the own brand of retail giant Evans Cycles — has taken a more trail-focused stance with the design of the Ramen 6 is music to our ears. Why? Because the majority of hardtails never see a start line, and traditional 'race geometry' — with its steep head angles and long stems — only ever feels at home when cranking, head down, along a fire road.

That's the theory, but did the stealth black Ramen 6 live up to its billing? Well, first impressions were good. The frame is a great shape, boasting a sloping top tube

that affords acres of clearance and plenty of freedom to move around in technical sections. Equally, there's enough length to feel comfortable when seated too, even with the saddle slid forward on the post. In turn, this length has allowed Pinnacle to run a respectable 70mm stem on all but the XL frame size (this gets an 80mm), keeping the steering precise and helping with a more rearward weight distribution on descents.

Sensibly, Pinnacle has also gone for a shimmed-out 27.2mm diameter seatpost. As a result, the flex in the spindly post takes the sting out of the trail to give a relatively comfortable ride in the saddle. And, the use of a shim means you've still got the option to upgrade to a standard size dropper post at a later date.

Partly thanks to the seatpost, and partly to the minimal SRAM X1 drivetrain and well-damped 120mm travel RockShox Reba RLT fork, there's a welcome peacefulness to the Ramen's ride. It seems to waft along in a serene bubble, even when there's chaos all around. When your bike is running smoothly and silently, chances are you'll relax and ride with confidence too, and so it is the case here. Only the difficult-to-modulate Formula brakes and hard compound Continental tyres detract from the experience.

Danny Milner

SPECIFICATION

Frame 6066, double-butted aluminium
Fork RockShox Reba RLT, 120mm travel
Wheels KT sealed bearing hubs, Alex 32-hole rims, Continental Mountain King folding 29x2.2in tyres
Drivetrain SRAM X1 chainset, r-mech, and shifter
Brakes Formula CR3
Components Pinnacle including 720mm bar, 70mm stem (S/M/L frames)
Weight 26.04lb (11.92kg)
Sizes S, M, L, XL

GEOMETRY

Size ridden L
Rider height 5ft 10in
Head angle 67.2°
Seat angle 71.4°
BB height 315mm
Chainstay 430mm
Front centre 711mm
Wheelbase 1,135mm
Down tube 700mm
Top tube 603mm
Reach 427mm

mbr

1ST IMPRESSION



HIGHS

Clean styling, refined ride and composed handling.



LOWS

Formula brakes are difficult to modulate.



Single-ring set-up is the icing on the Ramen's very well-specced cake

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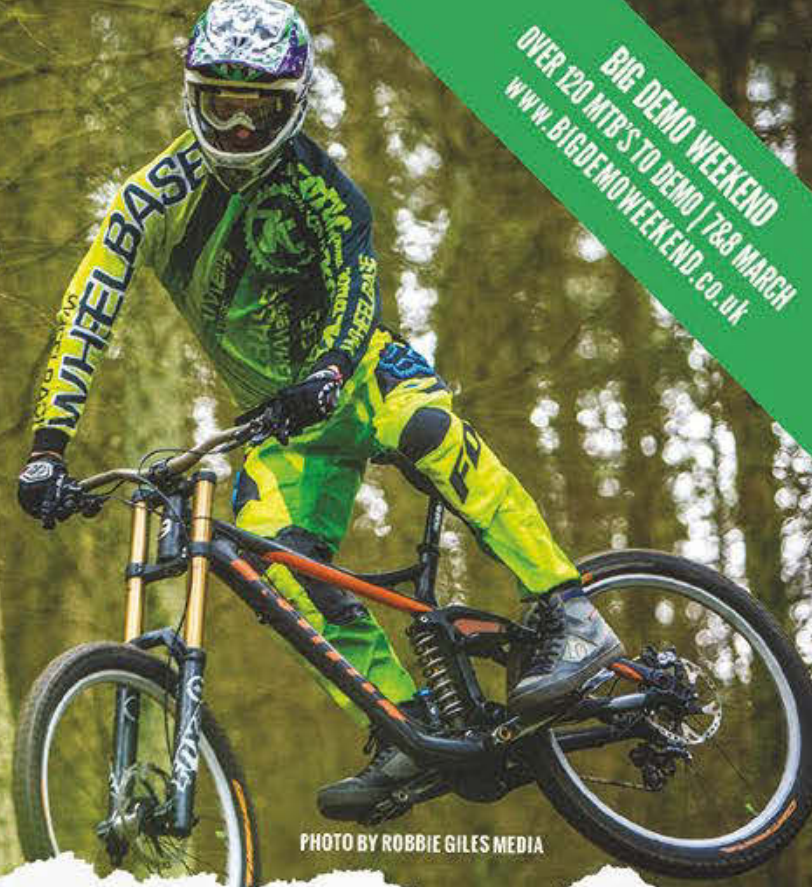


PHOTO BY ROBBIE GILES MEDIA

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GIANT INTRIGUE

£1,999 / 650b / giant-bicycles.com

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NEED TO KNOW

- Trail bike designed specifically for women
- Giant's Maestro suspension gives 140mm travel
- Three frame sizes all with low standover
- Giant Contact Switch R dropper as standard

Marketed under the Liv banner — Giant's range of women's bikes and products — the Intrigue has been developed with input from Liv/Giant rider Kelli Emmett, who placed top 10 in both the 2013 and 2014 Enduro World Series aboard the Intrigue. Obviously Kelli's success wasn't just down to the bike, but given the 27.5in wheels, 140mm of RockShox-damped travel and Giant's new geometry, it's not lacking in talent either.

And what better way to put it to the test than a week of riding in Sierra Nevada? Boxing up the bike for the trip to Spain, I felt reassured by the stiff rear triangle and Revelation fork with its tapered steerer tube and 15mm dropouts. The Intrigue looked like it was built to hit the big stuff, and big stuff was exactly where it was headed.

The trails of Sierra Nevada are unsurprisingly dry and dusty, with smooth, swooping descents across open hillsides, followed by rocky, rubbly, technical chutes, cobbled bone-shakers, switchbacks, rock gardens and a spot of tree-lined loose earthiness now and then. Oh, and all with a lot of climbing thrown in. A wide variety of terrain then, and the Intrigue took all of it in its stride.

Almost immediately, I was impressed by how light and nimble the Intrigue was for the amount of travel it offers, allowing for quick accelerations, line correction and manoeuvrability mid-switchback — of which there were many. All of which added greatly to my confidence and, well, fun! Oh so much fun!

Giant has carefully considered the component choice to maximise performance for the £2k price point. The drivetrain mixes Shimano and SRAM, with a Shadow Plus Deore rear mech to keep chainslap at bay, and a SRAM double chainset with a small 22-tooth granny ring suitable even for the steepest climbs. The Intrigue also gets

an internally routed Contact Switch R dropper post — a prized component that I feel I can't do without anymore, whatever trails I'm riding.

The spec's not perfect though. I could've done without the fat, squidgy grips, and I'd have preferred a wider bar than the 690mm Contact fitted. Other than these two minor complaints, my first taste of riding the Intrigue went from intriguing to exhilarating in short order.

Janet Coulson

mbr 1ST IMPRESSION



HIGHS

Feels like you can tackle any kind of trail.



LOWS

Narrow 690mm handlebar and squidgy grips.

SPECIFICATION

Frame Aluxx SL aluminium, 140mm travel

Shock RockShox Monarch R

Fork RockShox Revelation Dual Position Air, 140/120mm travel

Wheels Giant Tracker hubs, Giant P-XC2 rims, Schwalbe Nobby Nic 27.5 x 2.25in tyres

Drivetrain SRAM S1000 chainset and X5 f-mech, Shimano Deore r-mech and shifters

Brakes Shimano Deore 160mm

Components Giant Contact, with Switch R dropper post

Sizes XS, S, M

Weight 13.3kg (29.3lb)

GEOMETRY

Size ridden S

Rider height 5ft 4in

Head angle 68.1°

Seat angle 73.2°

BB height 325mm

Chainstay 446mm

Front centre 662mm

Wheelbase 1,108mm

Down tube 685mm

Top tube 560mm

Reach 386mm



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Moments of magic

It only takes a second to reconnect with the wonder of mountain biking

I used to have this daft formula for working out whether or not I'd got 'value for money' out of my ride by comparing time in the saddle with time travelling to the trailhead. Six hours down the M4 to get to a Welsh trail centre? That's six hours in the saddle you owe me, maggot. Or so roared my imaginary *Full Metal Jacket* drill instructor.

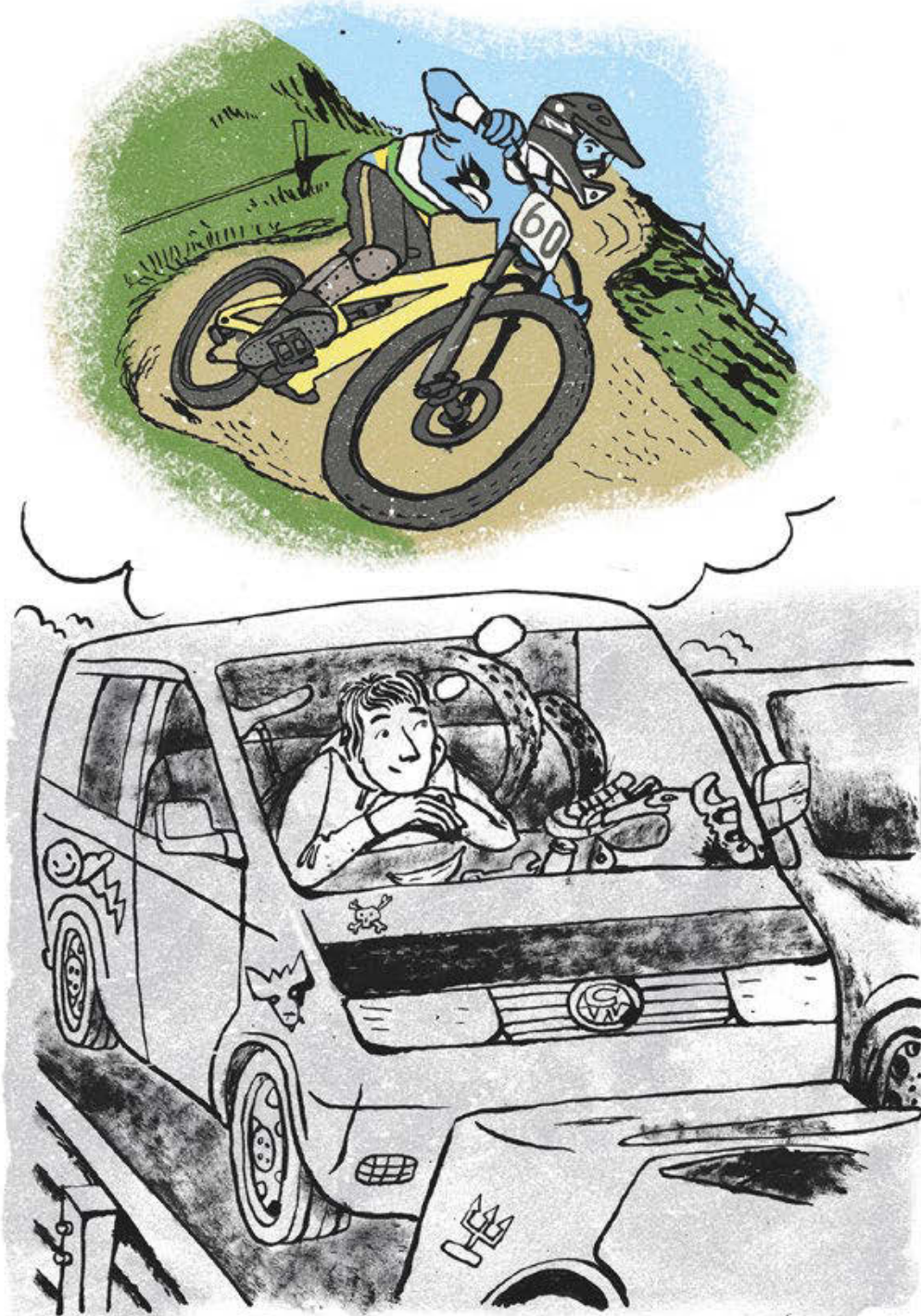
It made me a right royal pain the arse on trips to far-flung places where, to extend the analogy, my riding itineraries have been likened more to boot camp than holiday. Twenty-two hours on a plane to Canada, with associated faffage? That's a lot of riding time to make up, no slacking now.

Previously I'd have seen those weeks or weekends away as a chance to restock the mental reserves of inspirational memories to keep the passion alive. As that slightly twee anthem by Elbow has it, one day like this a year would see me right.

Now even that seems extravagant, and I'm having to really focus on those fleeting, stolen moments of magic to keep the flame burning. I guess that's what sustains downhill racers, who spend hours and hours on the road to compete for a minute or less in a high-stakes game of 'all in'. Before, I'd have considered that an insufficient return on investment.

But less than a minute of trail the other week taught me to appreciate how even the most fleeting moment of two-wheeled bliss can be enough. It was a new section to me, one that had gained what I'd consider some pretty substantial gaps. Way more substantial than anything I've attempted in a good while. Substantial enough for the mate leading me in to pause at the top and say, "You might want to look at this before riding it..." Which, I have come to learn, is a tactful way of breaking the news that I might be about to go in way above my head.

Anyway. We do one run at it and when I see the size of the first gap, I'm hard on the brakes and left stationary as my supposed lead-out train gracefully flies over the jumps and off into the distance. Ruefully I walk around to the side where a chap is also sizing it up with his riding buddy. The older of the two pushes back up, takes a run-up that



Downhill Racers spend hours on the road to compete for a minute or less

turns out to be woefully insufficient to make the gap and cases it hard enough to have me wincing. As he goes off for another go, the rider with him laughs and says, "It's my old man — fair play to him for having a go, though." Oh god, that's going to be Junior T in the not too distant future.

By the time my gang reappears, I'm apprehensive. They are going for another run. I half-heartedly tag along, not expecting to go through with it. Oh God, there I go, though, heart fluttering as the ground opens beneath me and...

wait, I've made the landing. Right, here comes the next one... Wow, that feels good... and the next... and the next. We reach the end of the trail, high fives and giddy excitement mixed with relief putting the biggest grin on my face in an age. It's been barely 30 seconds of riding but this high is going to sustain me for weeks, if not months. In this new context, entire Alps trips haven't delivered an adrenaline high as intense as this.

"Right, another run then?"

Er, no. Don't push your luck, Trent.








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BORN AGAIN RIDER

After years off the bike, veteran mtb snapper Geoff Waugh has caught the bug again

Sharper image

Life as a photographer keeps changing — and it keeps getting better

I recently read that we're communicating more through images than words in today's share-everything society (which is kind of ironic for a photographer writing a column). If every exposure of 500th of a second resulted in 1,000 words, well, my life would be as simple as squeezing the shutter. Maybe that's why I turned to photography after starting out as a writer. I found the instant gratification of taking a picture and seeing it on a page more satisfying than transforming heaps of scratchy shorthand into a coherent article. I preferred to work *in* the moment, not after it.

The line between the old fashioned 'smudgers' (photographers) and 'scribes' (writers) is increasingly blurred in these days of digital journalism. Time was when union rules forbade us to do the other's job, and heaven forbid if you had the skills to do both. Now filing video and images along with copy from a smartphone is standard practice. Believe me, if I could have ridden all those long Killer Loops for **mbr** and recorded them on something as small and light as a phone, I'd have jumped at the chance. It will happen, though, and it won't be too long.

When I started out I used to take two of everything in case something gave up the ghost. Electronic equipment can be fickle, as can the weather in some of the far out places we visited. I've been over the bars on ice and up to the gills in water... and don't talk to me about mud! On a normal ride I'd take two Nikon F5 bodies, three or four lenses and a flashgun. With film, spare batteries, trail food and a waterproof, climbs became more challenging and steep descents became a different ballgame altogether.

Then the digital era dawned. The cameras weren't up to much so I'd take a film body just to be sure of the shot. Then, when the equipment improved, along came a new style of photography influenced by skateboarding and BMX, with remote flash being a key ingredient. That meant yet more extra gear in the bag — two of the lightest and most compact tripods I could source, radio transceivers and two flash guns.

That same style of shooting remains today, and I doff my cap to **mbr** regular Roo, who obviously has the legs of a packhorse and the water-holding capacity of a camel to get around those long rides. Staying hydrated was always an issue, but now we have camera packs



that incorporate a hydration bladder. It's usually a small one though, and after five or six (seven?!) hours of riding, a litre and a half doesn't last long.

On one shoot in the high altitude and heat of Durango in Colorado, I remember mixing energy drinks in bottles and setting the alarm to get up and drink one or two in the night! There was no way I was going to suffer more than necessary. An exposed four-mile climb in the middle of the ride put paid to that notion — although, as usual it seems, the pictures more than compensated for the discomfort. And they'll last a lot longer.

Now we have cameras that come close to the Holy Grail. They're small, (fairly) fast, light and with interchangeable lenses — and the files they create are top quality, enough to

grace front covers and double page spreads alike. Some models can be dropped into a regular hydration pack and one would barely notice they are there. With high ISO performance, flash is no longer essential, and I think a lot of images benefit from that natural look. For trail photographers it is a new era.

Race photographers will still want super-fast autofocus and long glass, but for intrepid riders venturing far from civilisation for the sake of a perfect snaking ribbon of singletrack, a backlit ridgeline or a stunning panorama bathed in the golden light of a setting sun, it's different. Light and compact will always be the way.

It's an exciting time to be a shooter. Almost enough to get my aching back out of retirement...





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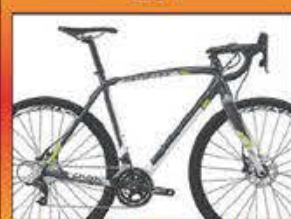
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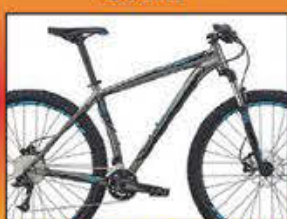
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★ STAR LETTER ★

BIKING'S STILL THE BEST

For as long as I can remember, I've loved riding my bike. From the days of my Raleigh Striker thinking I was Street Hawk to nowadays shredding the Surrey Hills and the South Downs on my beloved Codeine 29er.

In 1993, I was diagnosed with bone cancer just below my right knee. I was 18 at the time and as you can imagine it was a bit of a blow. My treatment required chemotherapy and an operation to cut out most of the bone, including my knee. I was told about the

various side effects and also the things I would no longer be able to do. My only question was, I can still ride my bike, right?

After months of treatment and physiotherapy, I'm happy to say I can. When I ride, I have this overwhelming sense of normality and freedom. Not a big deal, you might think, but when you're faced with a life-changing illness, regular operations and day-to-day pain, it matters. Hitting the trails clears my head, and riding with my friends — who push me hard and don't wrap

me up in cotton wool — is simply the best feeling.

So from that dark day in January 1993 to this January 2015, thank you to everyone who has played their part in making it possible for me to continue doing what I love — mountain biking.

Stephen Clyde

Ed – It's great to hear all these inspiring stories. Thanks for sharing with us, Stephen.



CROSSING THE LINE

February's feature 'Hone your skills anywhere' was a great insight into making your journey to and from work more enjoyable. However, I would like to add a word of caution: yellow/white lines can be extremely slippery when wet.

If — as on page 83 — you decide to 'ride the line' in damp or wet conditions, please take care. I happened to discover this earlier last year when I put my front wheel on a line — the next thing I knew, I was on the floor with cuts to my shoulder, arm and knee.

Jim Govier

Ed – Do you work for the HSE, Jim?

TRICKY LINK

On page 20 of the November issue, there's a suggested ride in Malvern with a GPS file downloadable at po.st/Malvern. When I type this in, I cannot find anything. Can you help with the link?

Paul Salmons

Ed – You should just be able to type this into the address line of your browser. It works for us in Firefox and Safari.

ATTACK COMEBACK

I read with interest in a recent issue about the guy who had the heart attack, as I had one after winning a veteran's cyclo-cross race at Thornes Park, Wakefield, in 2011. It was the same sort of thing; I had low cholesterol, normal blood pressure, I was a non-smoker and thin as a rake. Obviously, it was hereditary. My old man died at 53; I was the same age at the time of my heart attack.



After an operation, I got stuck into fell running straight away, but was annoyed that I couldn't get my heart rate up, so I binned the prescribed beta blockers and have never looked back since. I go as hard as I did before. I look at it this way: I am safer now than I was with 95 per cent blockages. I've been 43rd in the Three Peaks cross race since I had the stents, so job's a good'un! Tell your mate to forget he's had one!

Pete Wilkin ➔



Granite Chief 3: great trail bike from direct-sales brand Rose

Ed – We're glad it's working for you, Pete, but we'd usually recommend talking to a medical professional before taking such drastic steps!

CHIEF CONCERN

I saw your review of the Granite Chief 3. Just want to ask for your opinion on the Granite Chief 1. There is a big price difference. Do you think it's worth the extra money?

Adam

Ed – Obviously we're speculating, as we haven't ridden it, but for a full-suspension bike at £1,400, it looks like cracking value.

TYRE IRE

I have been riding since the days when bike choice was down to colour, then came suspension and bikes for every occasion. For every new purchase, the bike press has been used to help. I need some winter tyres, and the postman has just dropped **mbr** off with a winter tyre test – great timing, I think. But no, since my Turner has 26in wheels, I am left out. Do I, and thousands like me, have to sell perfectly good bikes just because we have 26in wheels?

Paul Bennett

TYRE IRE II

Since 2010, my beautiful boutique full-sus frame and trusty hardtail have been subjected to: bigger headsets, so I can't fit a nice new Pike to my hardtail; wider rear axles to move to 29in or 650b wheels.

To cut to the chase: there was nothing about 26in wheels in the (potentially valuable and interesting) group test on tyres, not even a comment on whether the winners were available in this size. Surely this would not have been too difficult to add?

Conrad

Ed – Fear not, Paul and Conrad, we haven't abandoned 26in! Check out page 18 for a round-up of the best 26in mud tyres.



There's life in 26in wheels yet

LOST AND FOUND

In December, I went to Llandegla. After faffing about with tyre pressures at the start of the trail, I failed to secure the zip on my pack. Several miles later, I realised my phone and tools had dropped out somewhere. I retraced my steps, but could only find my tyre levers and puncture kit – sadly no phone.

At the visitor centre, I was able to use another rider's phone to get a GPS signal of my phone's location using a smart phone app. I was particularly grateful, though, to the help given by trail centre head honcho Ian (nickname Badger) who was able to immediately pinpoint where on the trail the signal was coming from. He helped me get back out in fading light and freezing temperatures and directed me to within yards of where the phone was. My pal then rang the number, and there was my phone facedown in the mud, fortunately no worse the wear.

His help was invaluable and he really made my day. I managed to get back to the cafe before it closed and enjoyed one of their amazing, gargantuan cakes with a welcome hot brew to celebrate.

Andy Harrison

Ed – Even with all the technology in the world, you still can't beat a bit of good old salt-of-the-earth human kindness.

QUICK LINES

FAT CHANCE?

There have been a lot of developments in mountain biking over the last couple of years, covered fairly extensively by your magazine: 29rs, 650bs, long-travel, short travel, ebikes, the list goes on...

I have noticed an omission, though. In the past 12 months, there has been an increase in the number of fat bikes out on the trails, and I wondered whether you had considered doing a proper review of them?

Matthew Connolly

Ed – If climate change continues at a similar rate, don't rule it out!

OLD BLOKES WHO SHOULD KNOW BETTER

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WHO Bob Jones **WHERE** Offas Dyke, Wales **WHEN** November **HOW** Not paying attention, missed bridge crossing a stream, went over the bars and used my face to break the fall. Helicopter ride to hospital. Needed over 300 stitches.



WHO Graham Rooke **WHERE** Morthoe, Devon **WHEN** April **HOW** Messing about in the garden of a country house, dropped off a wall into a ditch onto my face. Found out later this is called a Ha Ha. Bloody funny!



WHO Stuart Jackson **WHERE** Hope line, Gisburn Forest **WHEN** December **HOW** Testing new YT Capra, thought I was Andreu Lacondeguy. Result: dislocated shoulder, broken collarbone, bruised ego.



WHO Steve Biggs **WHERE** Whinlatter **WHEN** October **HOW** Going too fast for corner, went head first into a berm. Needed 20 stitches.

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Every day, **mbr**'s forum is awash with advice, stories and gossip. Here's what you've been talking about this month.

What's your favourite bike you've ever owned and why?

My Holdsworth Tundra, the first mountain bike I ever owned way back in 1993. It weighed a ton, the gears were rubbish, and at the mere sight of a downhill it was more sketchy than a new born baby deer on ice. But it turned me on to mountain biking, away from BMX, and started me on this wonderful journey.

Jonbriggs

My Trek Navigator 100. I bought the bike in 2006 and it was the first bike I'd had since I was a kid that didn't hurt to ride. Nothing ached at all. I would just point the bike and ride, I didn't care where I was going, or how long I was gone.

Steve_sordy

My Skyway T/A BMX from the '80s. It spent more time in the air than is sensible and was eventually dumped at the tip after years of not being used. Doh!

Vegan runner

My Raleigh Chopper; nothing will top it. Going into the front room on Xmas morning and seeing a bright red sparkly new bike like my friends had.

Lonner

The Mondraker (at the minute, this may change by next Sunday).

NorthernMatt

MINE! I enjoy every minute on it, whether that's climbing hills or speeding along singletrack.... It doesn't matter what make it is, just ride and enjoy yourself.

DISGreece

My Orange Air 0, despite being named after a chocolate bar! It was my first really good bike and still gets the odd outing. I think I've only ever seen two other Air 0s.

Yorkshire_immigrant

If I told you it was anything other than my current one it would chuck me into the nearest ditch at the first opportunity in a fit of jealous rage!

DaMilkyBarKid

NEXT MONTH

HAVE YOU EVER HAD A RIDE TURN INTO A COMPLETE DISASTER? WHAT HAPPENED?

Join the debate at po.st/Disaster

YOUR PHOTOS



02



03



04

05



01 Mark Goodwill on the Trailhead Christmas ride near Shrewsbury this year. Photo: Darren Murch

02 Whinlatter's red route being enjoyed by Tom McVeigh. Photo: Jim McVeigh

03 Peak perfection with Mam Tor and Kinder in the background. Photo: Lee Masters

04 Sun, sea, singletrack; Neil's Trek Remedy on the Gower Way in Wales. Photo: Neil Daniel

05 Stepping up to the plate; Jay Shaw in Surrey. Photo: Frank Coffey

SEND US YOUR PICS

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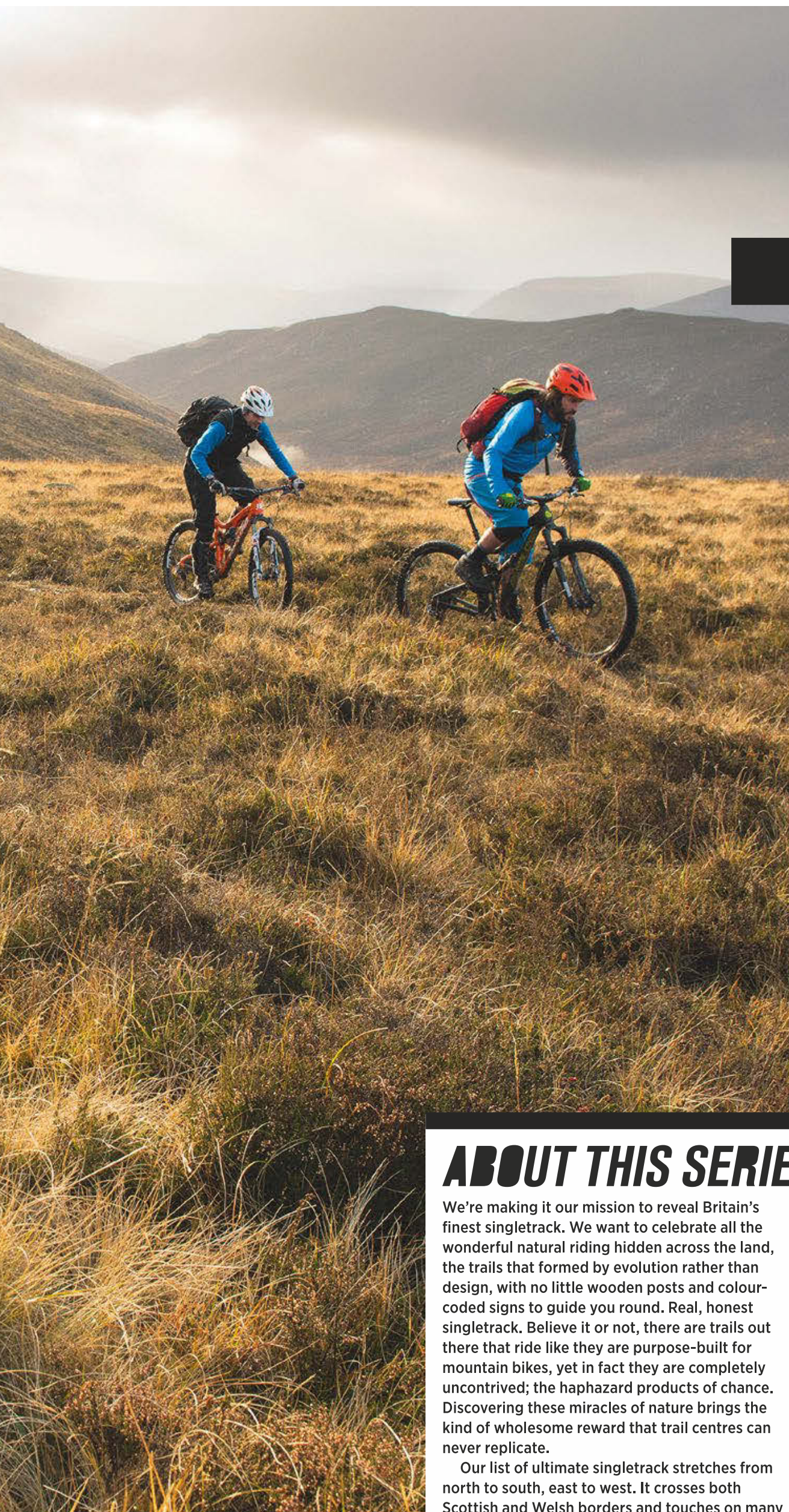
BALLATER, CAIRNGORMS

It might run through the majestic heart of the Royals' favourite Scottish retreat but you don't need blue blood to ride the Green Mile, just a mountain bike and a taste for adventure

Words & photos: Andy McCandlish



Snow showers loom above
Lochnagar on the descent
of the Coyles of Muick



The first drops of coffee hit my stomach within seconds. I felt that familiar caffeine surge of wakefulness warming through my body. It was just what I needed, chasing out the sub-zero morning and opening my eyes to the coming day.

I was stood beside Andy McKenna in Bean for Coffee in the centre of Ballater, on the south side of the Cairngorm Mountains. It was -2.5°C and while our bikes were leaning against the wall outside getting frosty, he hopped from shoe to shoe, waking up chilly toes — we had camped the night before in his VW and it was taking a while to get the old circulation going. Next stop was Cyclehighlands, the centre of all things mountain biking in the area, where Richard Watts was

waiting to lead us along one of his favourite trails.

Drawing a line over the map tacked to the shop counter, Richard revealed he was going to take us on a local classic. Known as the Green Mile, he reckoned it was one of the best trails in an area overflowing with great singletrack — recommendation indeed. It had been a busy time in the shop, so he was positively glowing with excitement at escaping for a ride. As we perused the map he quickly pulled his shoes on and we were out the door and spinning through the beautiful pink granite houses and shops in the blink of an eye, then out over the River Dee to leave the town behind.

This is Royal Deeside, playground of the Royals since 1852, when they bought the Balmoral estate eight miles west of Ballater. The profusion of ‘by royal appointment’ crests on local shops — everything from butchers to countrywear —

ABOUT THIS SERIES

We’re making it our mission to reveal Britain’s finest singletrack. We want to celebrate all the wonderful natural riding hidden across the land, the trails that formed by evolution rather than design, with no little wooden posts and colour-coded signs to guide you round. Real, honest singletrack. Believe it or not, there are trails out there that ride like they are purpose-built for mountain bikes, yet in fact they are completely uncontrived; the haphazard products of chance. Discovering these miracles of nature brings the kind of wholesome reward that trail centres can never replicate.

Our list of ultimate singletrack stretches from north to south, east to west. It crosses both Scottish and Welsh borders and touches on many

of the UK’s national parks. Among our selection are pocket-sized rides around intense networks of trail and sprawling epics that will take all day to complete. In every case they represent many of the most memorable rides we have experienced in our riding lives so far.

This is not, however, a definitive roll call. Like the trails themselves, we want to see this list evolve. With your input it can be honed and refined. So, if you know of any singletrack that is good enough to rank alongside national treasures such as Bowderdale in the Howgills, the Doethie Valley in Mid Wales and Minton Batch on the Long Mynd, we’d love to hear about it. Get in touch via mbr@timeinc.com or tweet @mbrmagazine #britainsbestsingletrack.



Hugging treeline
singletrack around
Creag Liath

The sun was out, and a thin veil of snowflakes were drifting in the light to add to the scene

— gives this royal link away, but speak to anyone in the area and it is kept respectfully low-key. It is the holiday home of the Royals after all, where they come for a bit of peace and quiet. Possibly a bit of mountain biking?

Spinning along the singletrack roads, past prim cottages and picturesque woodland, I could see where the appeal lay. Ballater, and nearby Braemar, have always seemed quietly prosperous and well-kept to me; mountain towns with tons of outdoor potential but keeping a peaceful and hospitable side to them. They seem to have escaped the brash development of other towns further north and west, sticking instead to cosy pubs and steamy-windowed cafes.

We hung a left onto an estate track, and within minutes Richard was scoping off to the left for a grassy singletrack heading into the mature woodland. He suddenly swung in, accelerating up a sharp rise as we followed hard on his heels, quickly getting swallowed up by the trees. The Green Mile's secret weapon is its hilltop singletrack, Richard explained between breaths, but they were always evolving the route to get there, adding singletrack wherever possible.

After a short stretch of trail we were back onto forest roads and a few more kilometres of tarmac, crossing the River Muick before beginning the climb through Alltcailleach Forest to our high point of the day. We all just settled in, cranking away rhythmically to make the kilometres pass and the altitude rack up without too much pain. A few switchbacks and nearly 300m of climbing later we had broken its back and approached the end of the track, heading onto grassy singletrack for the final few metres to the high point of the day.

Popping out onto the summit ridge was a revelation. The sun was out, illuminating the scene with that golden glow you only get on a



Gravity addicts get
their downhill fix

perfect winter's day, but dark clouds crowded close and a thin veil of snowflakes were drifting in the light to add a bit of drama to the already glorious scene. Our view to the north-west, previously hidden by the hill we had just summited, showed Ben Avon and the rest of the Cairngorms rolling away towards the horizon, black clouds ominously brushing the summits. The feeling of space was exhilarating and we all took a moment to digest it.

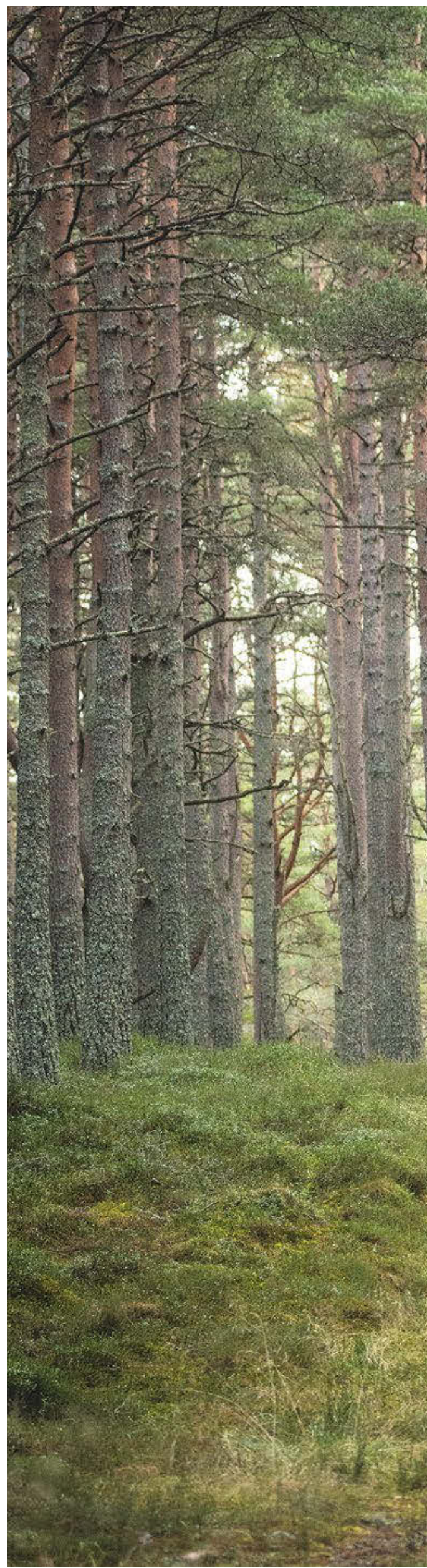
SWEET INSPIRATION

We were at a T-junction of the trail, with the left threading away, dropping steeply into a dip before climbing hard up to the summit of the Coyles of Muick.

"It's well worth a climb to the top, the views are spectacular," Rich nodded toward the top, "but this weather might be coming in, so it would be an idea to get a move on this time."

He was right; the clouds were already progressing across the Dee Valley, passing over the Balmoral Estate, tucked away unseen behind some local foothills. It looked grim despite our moment in the warm sun, so we reluctantly had to forgo the summit views and turned right to make our escape.

Permanently hunched Caledonian pines along one side of the trail showed just how vicious the weather can be on this exposed hillside, bent away from the prevailing south-westerly winds in submission. The trail was narrow, a woven mixture of grass, heather and roots, and as Andy ➔





Descending out of
Dalhefour Wood
towards the Dee



A flat blast through
the larch

led the way off I could see, over his shoulder, the thread of trail leading up to the next crest, then the next and the next after that, into the distance. It pulled us in, living up to its promise all the way.

“This is where we normally turn on the tap,” Rich shouted from behind, indicating the next section was normally a fast and furious gun through the heather. The trail had its winter coat on however, varying from superfast heather roots on the surface to peaty black holes brimming with water. Each one of them dared you to drop your wheel in, and each one could have a different outcome if you did. Would you hit the bottom and roll out unmolested? Or perhaps it would be eight inches deep, perfect for swallowing your momentum in a split second? The best way was to avoid them, or if not at least pop the front wheel over and be ready to absorb a rear wheel drop if the peat gods decided to frown on your progress.

Combined with the twists and turns, unexpected rocks and the occasional steep drop, the singletrack was sensational, with every challenge heightened by the inspiring location. Stopping for a few seconds to make sure I didn’t leave the view unappreciated I watched Andy and Richard dropping, popping, swaying and surging their way along the treeline, working hard in their own world with mile after mile of scenery cascading off to their left. This was real mountain biking, I smiled; this is what I came for. Look up

NARROW-MINDED

The textbook definition of singletrack is a trail no more than 18 inches wide, the stuff that arcs gracefully through a Swiss Alpine meadow or a redwood forest thick with loam. To restrict Britain’s best singletrack to such anorexic dimensions, however, is to ostracise some frankly brilliant riding. As a consequence, for the purposes of this series, we’re defining ‘singletrack’ as any trail wide enough for only one bike to pass along at a time.

Preserving these national treasures is everyone’s responsibility. In order to keep Britain’s singletrack single, stay on the trail as much as possible — which means riding through puddles and boggy sections, rather than around them. And if it’s really been hammering down for days on end, maybe avoid riding these delicate ribbons of perfection altogether.



Andy leans back as the descent from Creag Liath gets squirrely

We speeded up, shrugging shoulders around trunks as we leaned into the bends, cranking hard

'inspiring' in the dictionary and it may well have the coordinates for this spot.

I jumped back on and chased after them — a fruitless task as Rich was on a mission to fully enjoy his ride and Andy was shadowing him, cranking hard to stay on his back wheel. No stranger to the trail either, Andy regularly brings clients of his Go-Where guiding company to the Green Mile and he has never had anything less than blown-away riders at the end of the trail.

GOLDEN TRAILS

As we stopped at the final crest, a chill blast of wind-blown snow started, the day immediately darkening as the squall pushed in. You wouldn't have thought it was the same day as even 10 minutes earlier, and everyone zipped collars up hard and tightened cuffs to keep the breeze out. A final drop along a long-neglected fenceline, squirming down through steep rocks and the occasional root slide, and we popped out onto the forest track to spin down the section of trail that gave the route its name. Normally a bright, vivid forest with mosses, grass and trees all combining



The Queen's bakers do a perfect upper crust

to assault your eyes with everything green, it too had its winter coat on — albeit a rather shabby one. Big machines had been through, thinning the trees and gouging great ruts out of the ground, grinding the normally vibrant track into dull browns and blacks. Such is the way of things of course, and Richard wasn't overly concerned as it would no doubt recover soon enough.

Pausing to throw the bikes over a gate, Richard explained that the next section should be referred to as the Green Mile MkII trail, as it incorporated more singletrack than the normal ride. With that hanging in the air he dived across the road straight into the Dalhefour Wood and yet more of the good stuff. Popping over a gap in the mossy crumbling stone wall, yet another heartwarming scene of singletrack stretched off into the pine trees. The loam and pine needle-surfaced trail cut a dash through the trunks, golden brown against the green mosses and grass. We speeded up, shrugging shoulders around trunks as we leaned into the bends, cranking hard to keep up with our local expert who was clearly enjoying a well-earned day away from the shop. ➡

MY BACKYARD...

RICHARD WATTS

I grew up exploring the upper Dee Valley by bike before the days of the mtb. Fixing stuff became the norm and the arrival of mountain bikes was a revelation. Bikes as a business grew in my mind for many years and, after a career in outdoor pursuits, my wife and I took the opportunity to return to Royal Deeside and create Cyclehighlands in 2004. Rediscovering this stunning Cairngorm valley and opening up new singletrack has been just one of many highlights in a whirlwind decade! I think the shop really came of age in 2013 when the likes of Rob Roskopp, Josh Bryceland and a host of media spent five days with us testing new bikes at our shop and on our trails.



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Floating on a carpet of pine needles in a mossy woodland wilderness

As if to complete the trail portfolio of forest road, hilltop singletrack and loamy woodland path, the route finally burst out of the trees onto the banks of the River Dee for some riverside action. A whitewashed iron footbridge carried us across, by this time just another picturesque treat to add to the collection, and the trail turned hard right to follow the meanderings of the valley bottom.

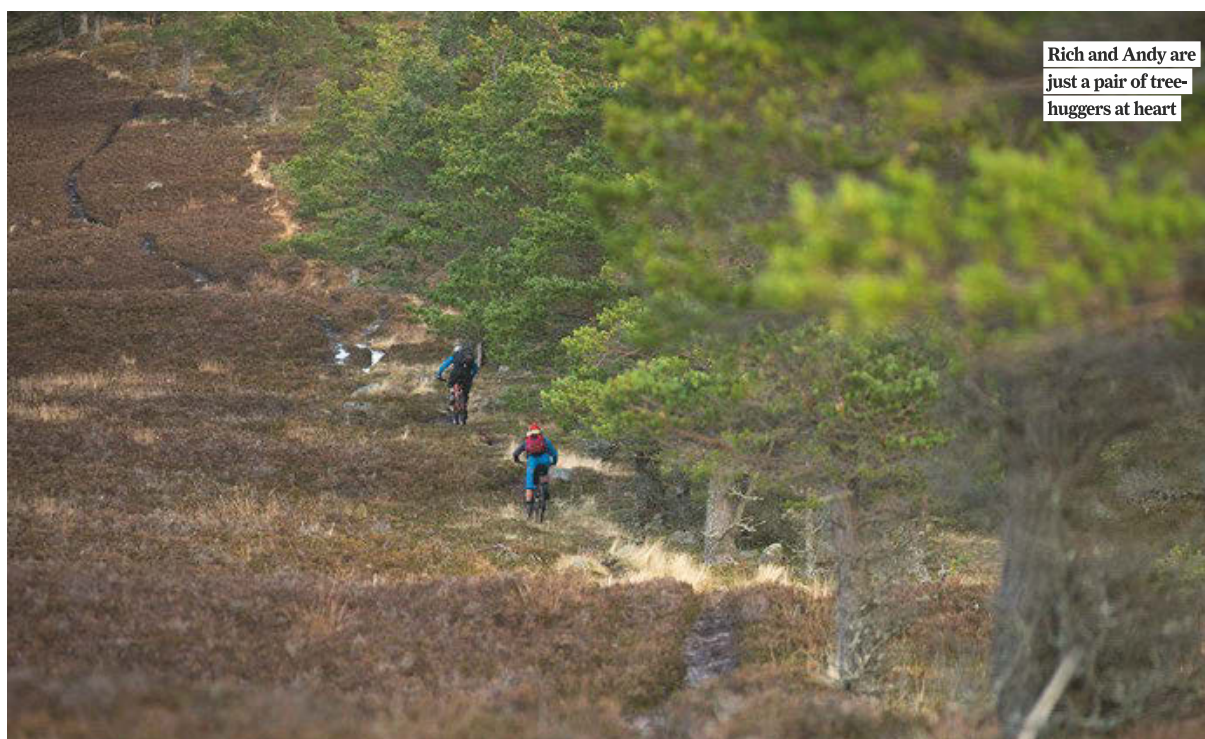
RIVER RIDE

This was the final leg, a lovely flat spin along the Dee, passing through birch and oak trees with the dark waters swirling to our right. The Dee originates at over 4,000 feet up on Braeriach in the heart of the Cairngorms, forming in the Wells of Dee on the summit plateau to make it the highest source of a major river in the country. It makes for an impressive scene, and attracts salmon fishermen from all over the world including Prince Charles, who likes nothing more than a cast into these waters.

Passing through the golf course we continued on round the banks before finally pedalling through the campsite and into the town itself, just as the lights were starting to glow in all the shop windows.

And so we finished our day where we started: in the coffee shop, just the way Richard wanted it. Warmed by a stiff pace along the riverside we dumped the muddy bikes, grabbed an outside table and sat in front of the steamed up windows to watch peaceful Ballater come to the end of another day. We could just see the top of the Coyles of Muick, our highest point, between the houses and so raised a mug to the perfect end to a superb day of high-rise singletrack. [mbr](#)

■ Download the route for free at po.st/BallaterGPS



Rich and Andy are just a pair of tree-huggers at heart



Whole latte love: caffeine fiends feel the buzz

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Just 15 minutes' drive along the glen is Aboyne with its bike park and some superb natural trails leading up to that most bikeable of Munros, Mount Keen — set a long day's challenge of crossing the Fungle Road (excellent singletrack in places) to Tarfside then returning via the Mount Keen summit and back down Glen Tanar. You won't regret it — it's one of the most satisfying rides in the country.

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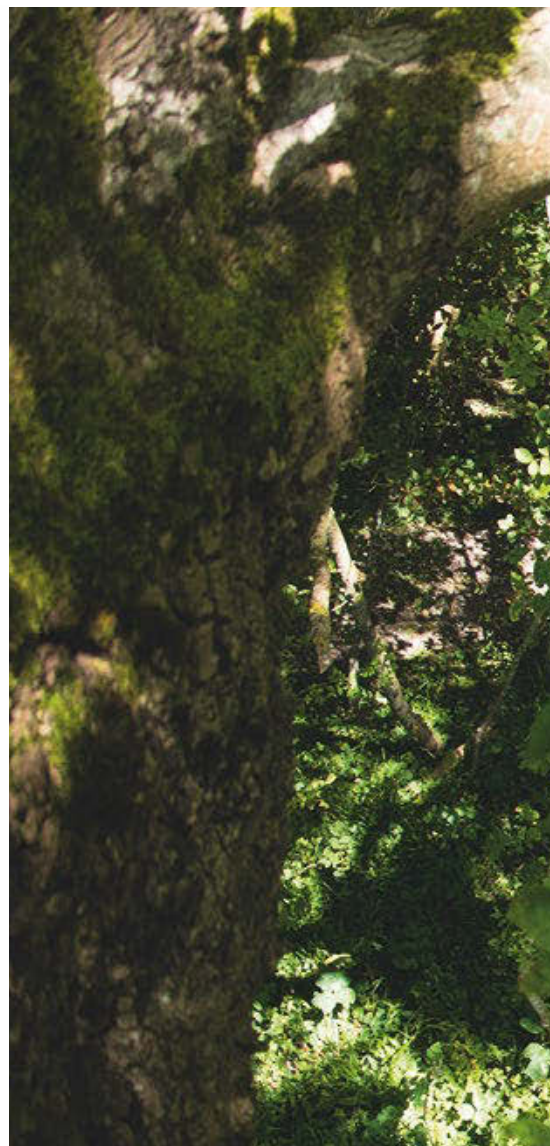
WAY DOWN SOUTH

The South Downs is not only a ridge line of rolling hills separating the English Channel from the southern counties — it's a mountain biker's playground, and there's more to it than just the South Downs Way

Words and pics: Seb Rogers



Rolling hills and
boundless skies are
the South Downs' way



One thing I've learnt over the years is this: never trust a mountain bike guide when it comes to talking about climbs. "Just one more big push and we're there", "don't worry, it's not that steep" — even the most trustworthy individuals have a stock of lies to trot out in the name of persuading gullible charges that the pain will soon be over. Descents, on the other hand, are a different matter.

Jim, who knows these rolling chalkland hills better than the veins on the back of his hand, shouts after my rapidly retreating back as I disappear into the leafy gloom of a woodland singletrack tunnel. "Stay right!" Or was it left? That's the trouble — I'm so caught up in the moment that all I've managed to register is that there's *something* I'm supposed to do, somewhere down here in this fast, dimly lit and — whoops, that's a big drop — really rather entertaining Scalextric track for bikes. Sure enough, the path splits and I have a decision to make. Left, right, left, um.... left. Left it is.

The narrow path stays high on a chalky ridge, its right-hand counterpart dropping into a steep-sided gully in my peripheral vision. There's a drop to my left, too — into the trees, which somehow cling to this north-facing slope — but I'm not looking at that, either. Nope. I'm concentrating on the rapidly unfolding spectacle just ahead of my front wheel. Roots, drops, line changes... there's a narrow line, literally, between fast-rolling success and tree-slamming failure. I manage not to fall off

that line and roll to a stop, practically giggling at the sheer fun of it, in a patch of dappled shade at the bottom while I wait for the rest of our crew to catch up.

This is the South Downs, Jim, but not as we know it. For southern-based mountain bikers there are two varieties of Downs. The North Downs — which barely count as north, surely, since they're well south of Watford — demarcate the boundary between rural southern counties and the beginning of urban sprawl. Wooded, compact and sandy, they've been enthusiastically adopted as the natural home of mountain bikers trapped in and around the capital's southern periphery. On a busy weekend they look for all the world like an overgrown anthill populated by two-wheeled workers.

The South Downs are different. Stretching over 100 miles between Eastbourne in the east and Winchester to the west, these rolling chalkland hills play host to one of the biggest bridleway networks in the country. As Jim, who's based in Worthing — midway-ish between the easternmost and westernmost points of the Downs — puts it, "We're really well placed. We could go out every night for a fortnight from Worthing and never do the same loop twice." Where the North Downs offer a compact riding experience, the South Downs spread their charms over a much, much broader area.

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

There are those, of course, who'll mutter that the South Downs is just the South Downs Way. True enough, the eponymous route is a big draw for riders of a vaguely off-road, long distance-ish ilk. Mostly wide, mostly well-surfaced tracks on mostly sane gradients make it a straightforward introduction to mountain biking, even if the three-digit total distance and five-digit total elevation gain make it a much tougher proposition



Arboreal embrace: for
the best singletrack,
head for the woods

than many riders anticipate. The rolling hills, gentle curves and (on a clear day) epic views out across the English Channel are big reasons to come and ride here. Easy rolling gives you the chance to drag your eyes away from the few feet in front of you and actually admire the view. The skies are big here. They have to be — the Downs are big too.


But here's the thing: the South Downs Way is just one small part of the area. The hidden side of the South Downs is away from this well-trodden path and a definite bonus for anyone willing to take the time to seek it out. It may come as a surprise, but there's tight, fast singletrack to be had here. Woodland blasts. Nose-of-the-saddle climbs. Even the odd short-stainingly big drop. You just need to know where to look. And that's why we're here today.

Cutting from west to east (or, if you insist on riding into the prevailing winds, east to west) across the northernmost flank of the Downs, it's



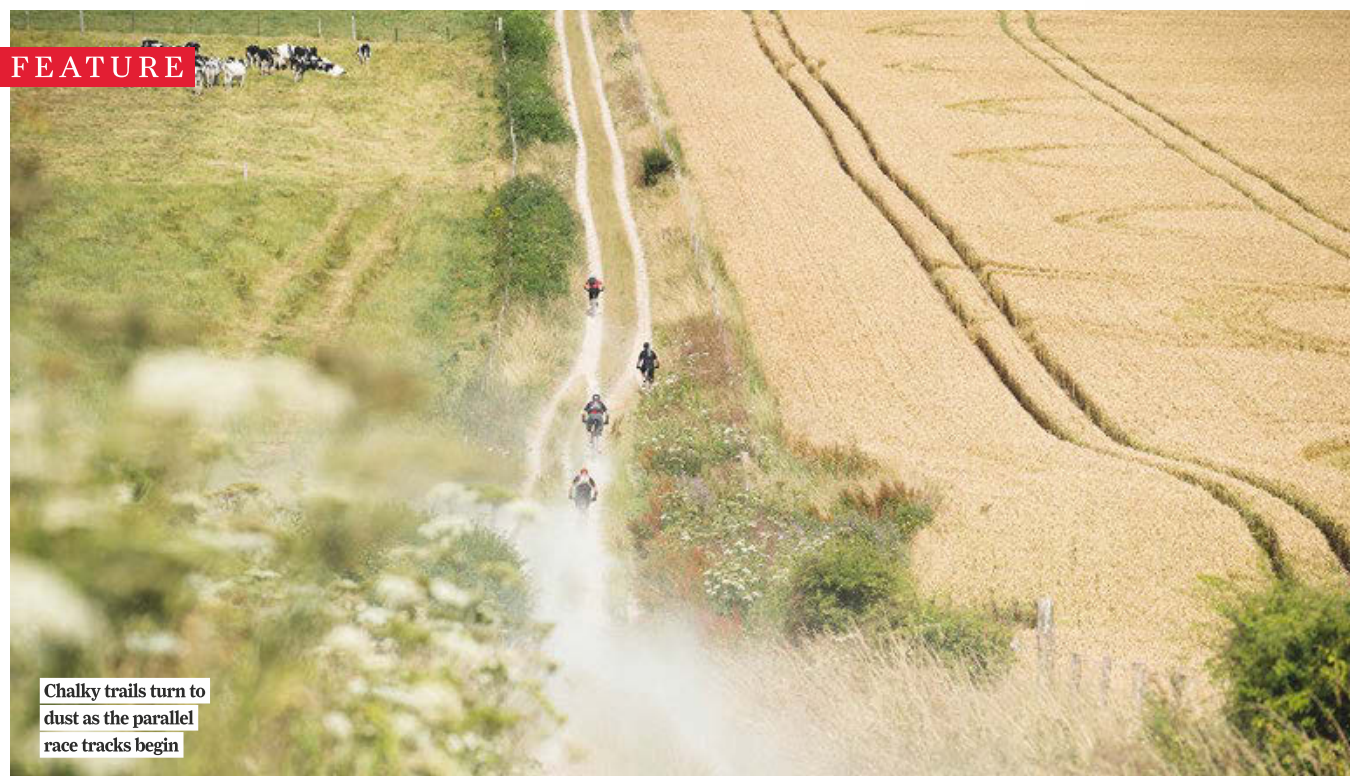
THERE'S TIGHT, FAST SINGLETRACK TO BE HAD HERE AND WOODLAND BLASTS

pretty hard to avoid the South Downs Way. Even if, as in this case, your aim is to steer clear of the South Downs Way as much as possible. And so it is that we find ourselves unloading in a car park full of ramblers intent on walking, er, the South Downs Way.

We head in the opposite direction, away from the maddening crowds and up a narrow singletrack bridleway that runs parallel to 



Wild flower meadows offer a quiet retreat from the crowds



Chalky trails turn to dust as the parallel race tracks begin

WE BRIEFLY CONSIDER JOINING THE SHEEP, SENSIBLY SHELTERING IN THE SHADE OF THE ANCIENT HILL FORT'S MATURE TREES

the main route's wide, gravel, human motorway. Lesson number one: sometimes there's a better bridleway within — literally — a stone's throw. Mental note made.

We've barely warmed up — well, not warmed up at all, in fact, even though my forearms are already glistening with sweat — before we dive off into the woods for our first taste of pukka Downs singletrack, scattering (politely, of course) a small group of walkers who've also stumbled across this little piece of shaded nirvana. JP, another South Downs veteran, points out as we regroup that a lot of the best riding drops off the northern flank of the hills. It's 'better' because it's steeper, but that also leads to the inevitable mountain bike sticking point: what goes down must come back up again. And if it was steep going down, there's a fair chance it'll be steep going back up.

It isn't this time though, because Jim's local knowledge takes us back up a gradual ascent on a farm track, rising above the Sussex Weald behind us and opening up over fields scattered with hay bales baking in the late morning sun. We bow to the inevitable and rejoin the South Downs

Way for another eastward leg, ticking off the contour lines in a cloud of dust to the A24 crossing. Over the road and it's not long before we can take a more interesting diversion off the main route, diving left to climb through some old chalk pits steep enough to give anyone running a race-orientated 2x set-up pause for thought. Chanctonbury Ring is on a natural promontory up here, commanding views towards the North Downs on one side and right back to the coast on the other. We briefly consider joining the sheep, sensibly sheltering in the shade of the ancient hill fort's mature trees, before giving in to the lure of another flint-spitting descent.

TAKE THE A-ROAD

Sticking close to the northern flank of the Downs has its advantages. First, you're never too far from the convenient east-west thoroughfare of the South Downs Way, which acts as a kind of scenic A-road for covering ground quickly. And second, it means you're close to all the entertaining stuff that drops off the northern edge of these hills.

Steyning Woods is a case in point. We're



Wooded ridges offer singletrack fun on the Downs' northern edge

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Scything through golden fields of corn



View to a thrill: verdant vistas lift the spirits

following JP's lead this time in a long, straggly train as we kick left off the main bridleway to pick up a narrow, flinty and downright entertaining path skirting the edge of the hill, just above the treeline. We pause for a moment at a junction, our trail continuing on the dividing line between arable and arboreal while another dives into the relative gloom of the woods.

JP waves an arm in the general direction of the trees. "There's loads of riding in there," he says, "built by the locals with the landowners' permission." As if to prove his point a couple of riders with full-face helmets appear out of nowhere, suit up and disappear down a narrow trail with added jumpiness. It looks fun. But we've got places to go, so we add it to our mental list of 'places to come back to another time' and clip in for more flinty, rooty singletrack along the flank of this natural playground.

It's time to leave the South Downs Way behind again, and this time, we're not going to see it for a while. We're heading south-west, away from the commanding views over the Weald and into the gentle folds and valleys that make up the bulk of the Downs' farmland. JP's got a route in mind, but there's some debate over whether it'll be too ➔

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The SDW: fast track to some great ride spots



Treehugging's not recommended on two wheels

THE DRY SUMMER HAS TURNED THE CHALKY BRIDLEWAYS INTO A DUST BOWL

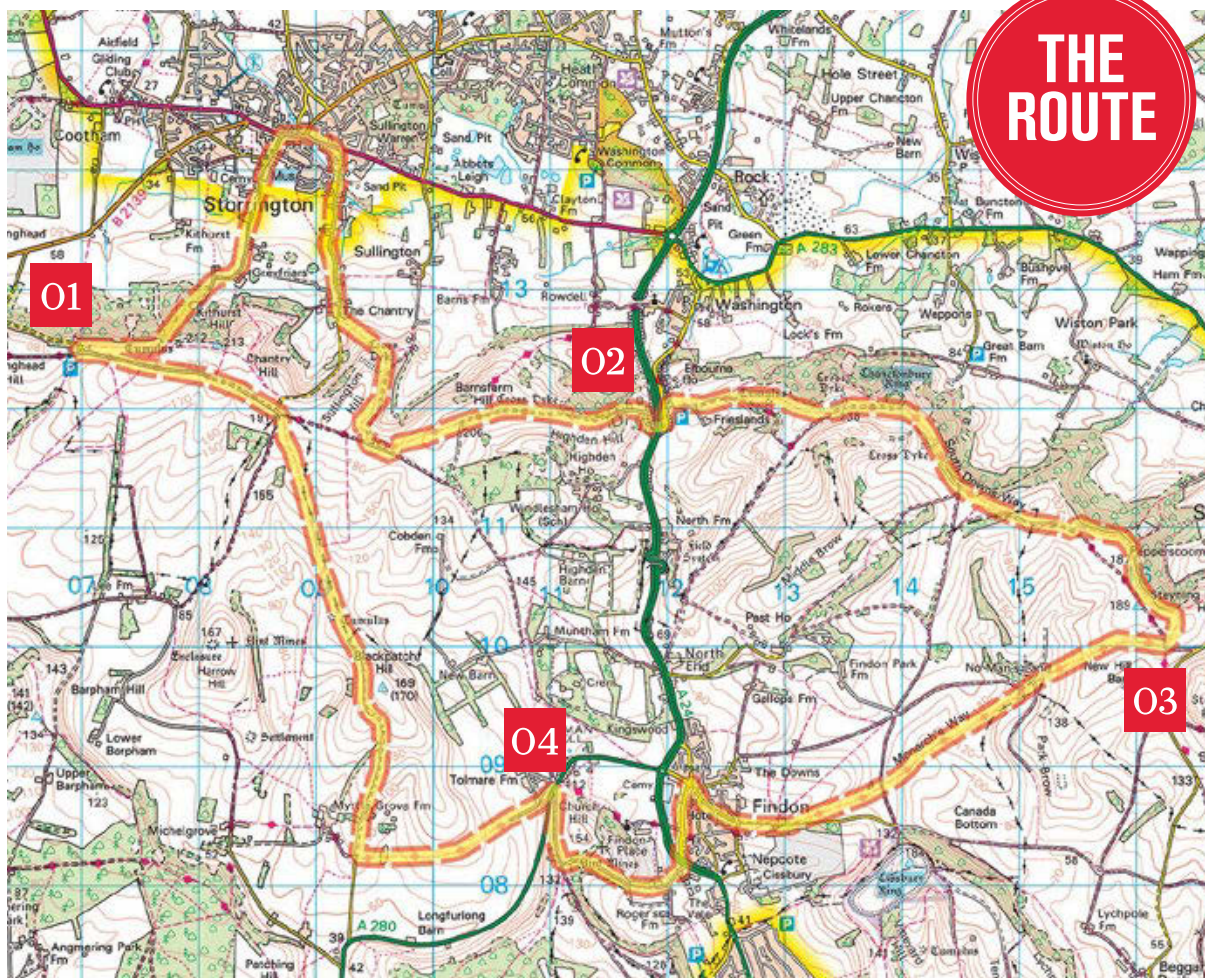
overgrown. Turns out it sort of is, and sort of isn't. We make our own path down a narrow, little-used bridleway, past the aptly named No Man's Land and into the expensive German car-festooned rural idyll of Findon. The well-dressed patrons of the local pub gamely pretend to ignore our sweaty, dishevelled and bramble-scratched presence in the garden while we refuel, but it's a relief to leave the bumper-to-bumper BMWs behind, cross the main road and head back out into the relative wilderness of the Downs again.

The dry summer has turned the chalky bridleways into a dust bowl and, for a few minutes, it feels as though we're somewhere else entirely. The riders ahead disappear in a choking white cloud. Jim reliably informs us that in winter it can be a completely different experience, with rain turning these smooth trail surfaces into something more closely resembling an ice rink.

We barrel past a combine harvester and down the narrowest of paths through a field of ripe corn. We're in the heart of the overcrowded South-East and yet, if we stop for a moment, the only sounds are the warble of the skylark and the distant drone of a single-engined aircraft lining up to land at nearby Shoreham airfield.

As Jim puts it, "There's lots of stuff tucked away here if you know where to look. You just have to plan out a route and join the dots together." This is definitely one occasion when the mountain bike guide is right. **mbr**

■ Download the gps file for this route for free at po.st/SouthDownsBestBits



WAY TO GO

01 **START (TQ070125) Car park at top of Kithurst Hill above Storrington.** Head E on singletrack BW running parallel to main South Downs Way (SDW) track. After 700m turn L DH and descend through woods into Storrington village. Turn R on A283, then R up Chantry Lane after 500m. After 1.5km turn L onto BW through woods and up Sullington Hill. Rejoin SDW, turn L and descend to A24.

02 **(TQ119118) A24 crossing.** Cross dual carriageway and continue on SDW for 600m. Branch left on narrower BW, climbing through chalkpits and up Chanctonbury Hill for 1km before rejoining SDW. Stay on SDW for 2.3km then turn sharp L up small rise (easy to miss) on narrow BW. Continue on this BW around upper edge of Steyning Woods for 1.3km. At junction by bench turn R up hill to rejoin SDW.

03 **(TQ163100) SDW/Monarch's Way junction.** Bear R off SDW to follow Monarch's Way BW and continue SO on this trail to Findon village (after 1km at No Man's Land in valley bottom trail bears slight L). May be overgrown in summer. Descend into village, turn L along high street and continue to A24 crossing. Cross road by garden centre and climb BW up hill



through woods towards Church Hill. Continue to A280 crossing.

04 **(TQ110088) A280 crossing.** Cross road (care needed — blind summit both ways) and continue on Monarch's Way BW for 1.7km to junction with Longfurlong Lane. Turn R up track and climb past Backpatch Hill, staying on this BW to junction with SDW at Chantry

Post. Turn L and stay on SDW for 1.6km back to car park.

TOTAL DISTANCE:
29.6km (18.4 miles)
TOTAL ASCENT:
679m (2,228ft)

MAP

- OS Explorer 121 Arundel and Pulborough
- OS Explorer 122 Brighton and Hove

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

If you want to know the best places to ride, it always pays to ask a local. Thanks to the following for their help putting this feature together: Quest Adventure bike shop, Worthing, questadventure.co.uk; South Downs MTB Skills and Tours, southdownshosting.co.uk/sussexmtbtours



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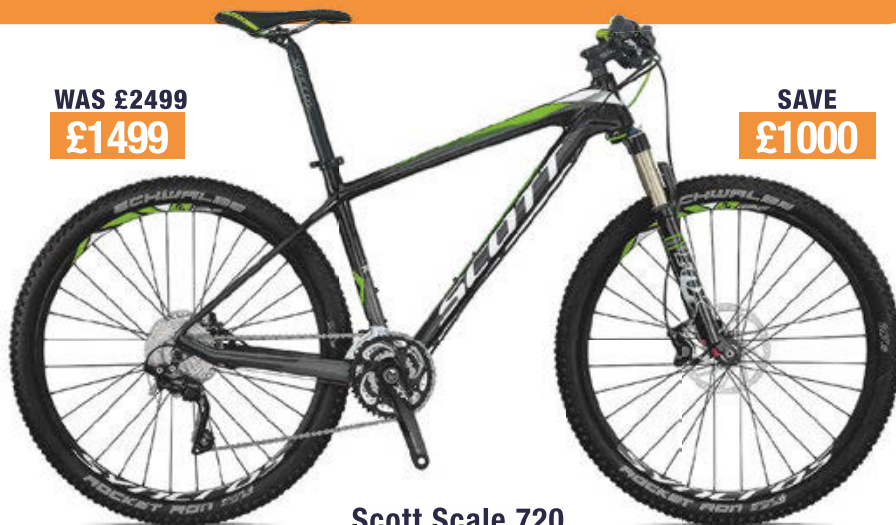
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Taking NATURE'S course

*When is a trail centre not a trail centre?
When the waymarkers are the only
manmade feature in sight. Welcome to
the North York Moors' Sutton Bank*

Words: Anna Glowinski Photos: Jacob Gibbins

All things being equal, most of us would rather venture out into the wilderness instead of being a slave to the trail centre. The problem is, finding your own path across the countryside is often easier said than done. A Garmin on your handlebar appears to take the pain out of navigation, but even GPS tracking cannot predict an underused path becoming so overgrown that you cannot ride it in summer, or a deep bog appearing where there was solid ground the previous week. Even if you are lucky enough to discover a clear trail, there's always the chance that you'll take a wrong turn and find yourself being told to "get off my land!"

These challenges were the starting point of an idea that led to the Carter family creating the Sutton Bank trail centre. Husband and wife Adrian and Cathy are the heart and soul of the famous Dalby Forest trail centre. They also own Pace Cycles, their business based in the Courtyard at Dalby Forest, which consists of its cycle centre, cafe and wash facilities. Their daughters Aimee and Sophie — having spent their childhood amongst bikes — are now grown up enough to be running the family business, and they bring the youthfulness and eagerness needed to create and nurture new projects.

By all accounts, though, Sutton Bank — their latest venture in the North York Moors — didn't need creating so much as legalising.

"It's not exactly a trail centre," Sophie explained while brewing steaming mugs of Yorkshire tea, early on a misty winter morning. "It's like the next step for those people who may have only been introduced to mountain biking through trail centres and want a bit more adventure; a taste of wild riding out in the wilderness. When you're riding here, you don't feel like you're at a typical man-made trail centre — it's full of natural singletrack and existing bridleways; it's just that there are signs to guide you in the right direction. It's the next step on the road to wild riding."

INCREDIBLY MOORISH

We are standing in the kitchen at Sutton Bank Bikes, the newly opened, Carter-owned bike shop and portal to the trail development. It is based in the previously under-used visitor centre at the top of Sutton Bank, nearly 1,000ft high and the gateway to the North York Moors National Park.

IT'S THE NEXT STEP FOR THOSE WHO WANT A BIT MORE ADVENTURE, A TASTE OF WILD RIDING OUT IN THE WILDERNESS

But the existence of the shop was something of an after-thought; the trails were a project that took two-and-a-half years to get off the ground.

The story goes that Sophie used to commute past Sutton Bank every day. Then she had a light-bulb moment, realising that it would be a great place to develop some trails. So Adrian and the girls developed a proposal, which they took to the National Park Authority. In it, they explained that creating mountain bike routes, without changing the landscape or disrupting the natural ecology, could attract a large number of visitors. In fact, keeping everything as natural as possible would be at the core of the project. It would be the unique selling point to put the area on the map as a riding destination. To the Carters' great surprise, the authority not only agreed, but said it would support the project too.

Observation of the riders using Dalby Forest over the years gave the Carters insight into what was missing from the area. They knew from the outset that the aim of Sutton Bank should not ➔





England's finest views? It's hard to disagree



Bike shop on Sutton Bank is the trail portal



Pre-ride briefing from Sophie Carter (right)



Initial link trail is the only manmade section



Trails like this have been here for centuries



Nature makes a pretty good trail-builder



Trail unpredictability adds to the excitement



Heading into the wilds calls for carbs

be to create ‘another Dalby’. As riders themselves, Sophie and Adrian rarely spend time on marked trails, preferring to go exploring and looking for the more unpredictable, rugged thrills of natural terrain instead. They envisaged Sutton Bank becoming a centre of trails, a facility to help riders find their way around paths that already existed and could stay as raw as they’d ever been. As a result, making this project a reality was a case of legalities and permissions, as opposed to diggers and tree-felling. It would offer an outdoor wilderness experience, but with the gentle reassurance of small luxuries such as waymarkers, toilets and a cafe.

Quietly they worked for two and a half years to create and launch Sutton Bank Bikes. Finally, here we are, ready to see if they’ve turned their vision into a reality.

ENGLAND’S FINEST FIELDS

Right outside the shop is a skills area, perfect for both little and big kids to have a whizz around and experience some lumps and bumps. Around the corner is one of very few man-made paths leading to the start of the Cliff Trail (green), Fort Trail (blue) and Paradise Trail (red). We started out on the Fort Trail, making our way for two and a half miles along the stunning ridge, following signs pointing to “the finest view in England”.

The path we were on ran parallel but separate to the main walkers’ path, cut into the grass by horses’ hooves and knobbly tyres. Despite the buckets of rain that had poured down in the previous few days, there was not much mud, or at least not the sort of boggy, slow, painful, demoralising type of mud, that can ruin a ride.

It was clear that this part of Sutton Bank was very much about the view; the trail may have been flat and undemanding, but right below us was



YOU’RE SURROUNDED BY COUNTRYSIDE WITH LITTLE EVIDENCE OF MODERN LIFE. PYLONS AND ROADS DON’T SEEM TO EXIST HERE

Lake Gormire, reflecting the light and hosting its ghosts (it is, apparently, haunted). Beyond it were fields, fields and more fields. The ridge stretched out in front and behind us in an uninterrupted line of cliff edges and hillocks. It was our job to follow it. If you were out here for a ride on your own — and in fact we passed a couple of riders who were doing just that — you would feel surrounded by extensive countryside with little evidence of modern life. Pylons and roads just don’t seem to exist around here.

We kept on the longer blue trail and followed a cheerful blue and red arrow nailed to a subtle,

wooden post. At this point we picked up signs to the red-graded Paradise Trail. Having warmed up and prepared on the blue, it is possible to take advantage of the ‘stacked loop’ trail system and ride uninterrupted from one to the next. The ride stayed mainly flat but we were heading towards what looked like an old quarry. Sophie pointed out the path up ahead that curved back in our direction down a sweeping, grassy hill. To get there, we had to open and close a few gates, mastering the group art of passing the open gate back to the following rider so that nobody had to put their foot down. ➡



Only the occasional farm breaks the illusion of true wilderness



Much of the land drains well, is dry and quite grippy



The 'centre of all trails' at Dales Bike Centre

NOT THE AVERAGE TRAIL CENTRE

When natural-feeling rides meet home comforts

DALES BIKE CENTRE

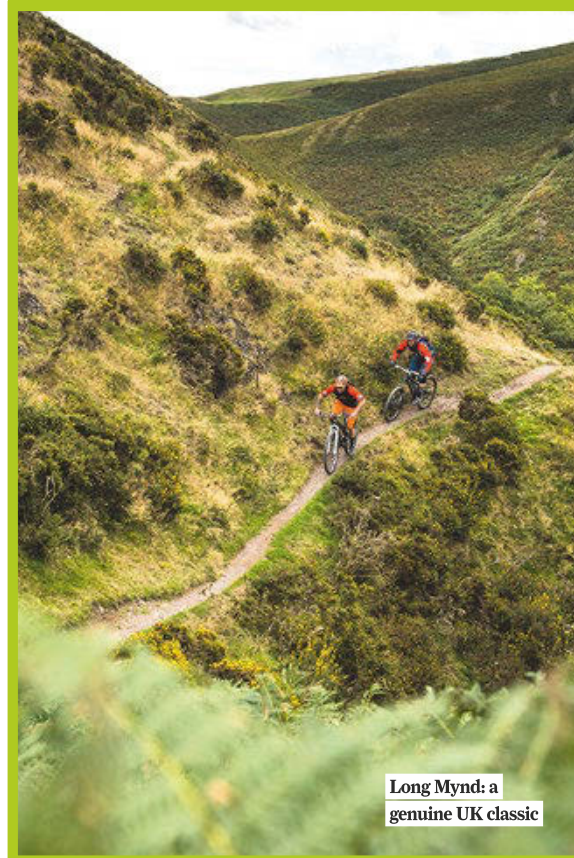
Billed not as a trail centre but simply the centre of all trails, the Dales Bike Centre is a pioneer in the field of alternative trail centres. Situated in Swaledale, deep in the heart of the beautiful Yorkshire Dales, this old stone farm is part bike shop, part bunkhouse, part cafe, part hire centre and all passion.

■ dalesbikecentre.co.uk

SHROPSHIRE HILLS MOUNTAIN BIKE & OUTDOOR PURSUIT CENTRE

The Shropshire Hills MTB Centre couldn't be better placed to capitalise on the brilliant trails of the Long Mynd, near Church Stretton, with one of Britain's best singletrack trails (Minton Batch) leading straight to its front door. There are waymarked rides, a bike shop, cafe, pod accommodation and camping, all on site.

■ mtb-shropshire.co.uk



Long Mynd: a genuine UK classic



THIS ISN'T THE FAST FOOD FIX OF MODERN TRAIL CENTRES BUT A CELEBRATION OF NATURE AND THE GREAT OUTDOORS

The moorland trails here provide scope for an all-day epic

Much of the land we passed is privately owned by individuals, albeit overseen by the National Parks, which is why we had permission to pass. The turning point was an old barn from which we dropped down a fast, swooping descent, the old quarry wall standing tall beside us. The path was only a couple of tyres wide, and slippery to boot; it required a fair amount of concentration and resulted in a good deal of smiling.

As we continued, the trail became more technical with areas of rocks on narrow singletrack. It rose and fell several times, looping around Boltby Forest. Eventually we got to K2, the steepest section of the Sutton Bank trails, and enjoyed the buzz of some serious speed.

Of course, the ying to that yang was our being subjected to a seriously steep but thankfully short climb. Next we went up and down like a rollercoaster towards Boltby Village, with Boltby Forest as the imposing backdrop on our left, and the occasional peek back to Sutton Bank on our right.

POINT TO (NO) PINT

We descended into the village, but didn't receive the reward we were hoping for, as it quickly became apparent that there was no pub or refreshments available, so remember to pack your own lunch if you are planning this loop. I suppose this is what happens in real-life adventures away from the comforts of the trail centre.

From here, it really felt like we were homeward bound as we climbed up 1,000ft of gentle, forest road singletrack back on to the escarpment top, where we blasted all the way back to the centre.



Time out to admire the stunning vista

My reflection on riding Sutton Bank is that it is quite a simple concept. The terrain is simple in some ways too. There are no jumps, no berms and no wooden walkways. This isn't the feature-laden, thrill-a-minute, fast food fix of the modern trail centre, where every metre of track has been carefully designed to keep riders grinning.

Sutton Bank celebrates the way that nature builds a trail, and delivers an experience that's all about being out there in the great outdoors. Of course, it can be ridden with family and friends, but these rides are much less about "whoop whoop" and "did you see me do that?", and much more about breathing in the scenery and absorbing the sense of solitude and magnitude. From that point of view, it really does feel like the next step towards adventure riding — get out there, ride in the real world, enjoy the best bits and skip all of the hassle. **mbr**

SUTTON BANK TRAILS AT A GLANCE

CLIFF TRAIL

GRADE: Green
LENGTH: three miles
ESTIMATED TIME: 20mins to one hour

FORT TRAIL

GRADE: Blue
LENGTH: 5.5 miles (short loop); 7.5 miles (long loop)
ESTIMATED TIME: 30-90mins (short loop), 45mins to two hours (long loop)

PARADISE TRAIL

GRADE: Red
LENGTH: 17.5 miles
ESTIMATED TIME: 1hr 40mins to four hours

MORE INFORMATION

■ Sutton Bank Bikes, Thirsk, North Yorkshire, YO7 2EH
■ suttonbankbikes.co.uk





Dave Sheppard, Evans Cycles B&M Team
Image courtesy of Dan Hearn Photography

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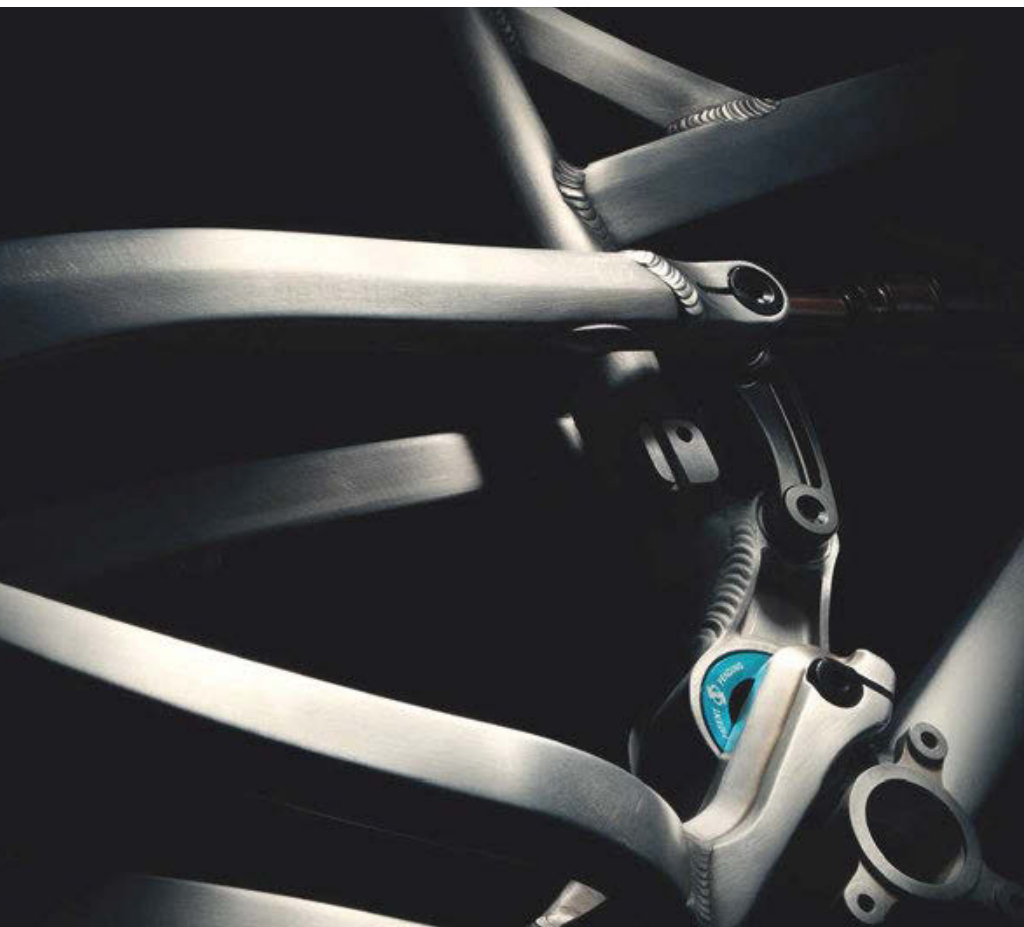
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YETI BIKES & FRAMES

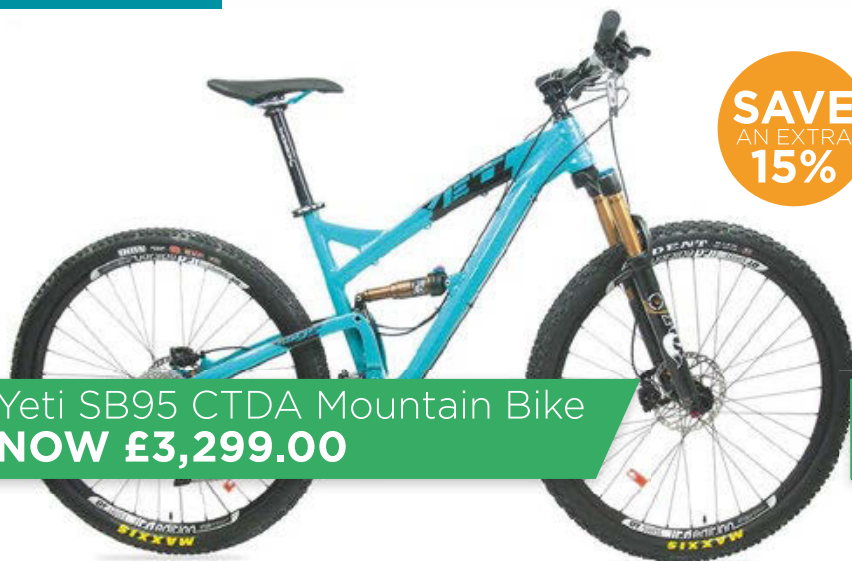


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mbr NEXT MONTH

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Brendan Fairclough
on using your body
weight on your bike

**SHOES
ON TEST**

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on test

NEW ISSUE ON SALE WEDS MARCH 4

Q&A

This month:
*clipless pedals,
QR to bolt-thru,
and scratched
seatpost remedies*

THE BIG QUESTION

How do I set up my clipless pedals?

Q Tempted by the idea of more efficient pedalling, I've taken the plunge and treated myself to some Shimano SPD pedals and shoes. Problem is, I don't really know what to do next? How do I avoid looking like a total numpty?

Daffyd Pritchard, email

A Making the move to clipless pedals can be a little daunting, not least because it's a more permanent connection to the bike. Set-up is way more involved than planting your size 9s on a flat, and there is plenty of margin for error. With a few pointers you'll be fine (although we can't promise that you won't look like a numpty when you first make an unscheduled stop and unceremoniously keel over, still clipped in).

Before you get started, equip yourself with a set of fresh Allen keys and some

grease as a bare minimum. In addition we'd thoroughly recommend a pedal spanner of a decent length, a small bottle of Loctite 243 threadlock and a torque wrench to make a proper job of it.

When removing your old pedals, remember that the left pedal has a left-hand thread so you undo it in a clockwise or 'opposite' direction. If your old pedals have proper 15mm spanner flats, this is where a dedicated spanner makes things easier, especially if the pedals have been on your bike for a while and are seized.

Liberally apply grease to the threads of your new SPDs and fit initially with an Allen key. Only ever get the big guns out for the final tightening and don't be shy — 35-55Nm. You'll struggle to achieve this with an Allen key unless it's extra-long or you're Geoff Capes. With the pedals on, let's fit the cleats.

YOUR EXPERT

AL VINES
Tech manager for i-ride. Born with Allen keys in his hand, Al loves a challenge. Just don't ask him to get on a chairlift; he prefers solid ground.



Correct cleat positioning is the difference between pain and gain

HOW TO FIT YOUR SPD CLEATS CORRECTLY

Mess up your cleat fitting and you're leaving yourself open to a world of pain. Loose cleats equal physical pain. Wonky cleats equal knee pain. Seized cleats equal a pain in the arse. It's really not hard though — here's how to do it.



01 When starting out, position your cleats all the way back and dead straight on the base of the shoe as shown. It's now commonly thought that running the cleat all the way back helps pedalling efficiency and stability.



02 You can get away with just grease on the bolt threads, but Loctite 243 is what you really want because it prevents the bolts from rattling loose and makes them easier to remove down the line.

EXPERIMENT WITH PEDAL TENSION

Shimano pedals have adjustable release tension, which means you can decide how easy it is to get in and out of the pedals. There is an adjuster on each side.

Start off with a low tension for easy release and work your way up. Higher tensions feel more secure and you're less likely to release accidentally. Make sure the tensions are even on all sides of both pedals but beware of winding out the adjustment bolt all the way, as getting it back in again can be a headache.

It pays to keep your pedals lubricated — the moving parts will function better and mud is less likely to stick to them. If it's really muddy you might benefit from backing off the tension to aid engagement and release.

Over time the cleat will wear and become loose in the binding. We'd recommend replacing the cleats at least once a year. With brands such as Time and Crank Brothers, well-judged cleat replacement is even more important, as the cleats are made from a softer material and can wear out quicker.

If you have trouble engaging the cleat you may find raising it slightly from the bottom of the shoe using a shim allows it to protrude further. You can also remove some of the tread around the cleat box with a Stanley knife.



03 It's likely that you'll want to tweak the angle of the cleat to get it just right. Left and right cleats may need to be set up differently to eliminate the risk of pain or injury. A tool such as the Ergon TP1, pictured, can be invaluable to tweak the position of your cleats.



04 Tighten the bolts. Using a torque wrench makes this easy (5-6Nm).

QUICK FIXES



1X WITHOUT A CLUTCH?

Q Can I run a narrow/wide chainring without a clutch rear mech? I can't afford them both right now!

Jacob Harris, email

A Of course — but we'd recommend waiting a while/saving harder. Unless your trails are beautifully manicured then chain derailment without the security of a clutch-mech can happen more often and we'd hate for you to come a cropper.

SCRATCHED SEATPOST

Q I've just pulled the seatpost out of my bike and the post is all scratched. It feels rough as a badger's arse when I put it in the frame. How can I fix this? Pretty gutted that it's so scored up now.

Phil Stephens, email

A We feel for you Phil, we really do, but there is very little that can be done. You can take solace in the fact that unless it's been totally ravaged it's only going to be superficial. You can prevent it from getting worse and make it feel more baby's bottom than badger's arse by getting the seat tube of your frame reamed. This requires an expensive tool so it's going to mean a trip to a bike shop. It might be worth phoning ahead to ensure they have said tool to fit your seat tube (the size is on your post if

it's still legible; if not, check the manufacturer's specs).

CONVERTING QR TO BOLT-THRU

Q I've just purchased a Hope Hoops wheelset with the well-reviewed Hope Pro II Evo hubs. I need to convert them from quick release to a 12mm bolt-thru axle. Is it possible to use the axle from my older, non-Evo Pro II hubs?

Greg Watts, email

A Sadly not — the Evo uses a different axle design so they aren't interchangeable. The newer axle is pretty darn smart though, and you just need the right conversion kit, which consists of a couple of end caps to make the change. As such they are way cheaper than a complete axle and you can simply pull the old caps off and push the new ones on. Result!



Formula C1 disc brake bleed

Follow this step-by-step guide to give your C1 brakes a once-over

Formula has been very successful in securing spec on a wide range of new bikes over the last couple of years. Consequently there are a lot of bikes plugging around fitted with its disc brakes. The C1 is the model that's most frequently fitted by manufacturers, so following a few requests for advice, we've decided to put together a guide to bleeding it.

It's essential that you use the correct fluid for this procedure; using anything other than Dot 4 can cause problems and isn't recommended. C1s should have a fairly solid lever feel; if they don't then it's likely that there's air in the system and that the brake will still need a bleed.

Bleeding a brake replaces the old fluid — it's a good idea to do this annually regardless of lever feel — and purges any air from the system. It can be an unnerving task but as long as you think about what you're doing, take your time, follow this guide and take some basic precautions, you'll have your brakes feeling amazing again on the cheap.

NEED TO KNOW

● **TIME TAKEN**
20-40min per brake

● **SKILL LEVEL**
Medium

● **MONEY SAVED**
Around £25 per brake

● **GOT INTO TROUBLE?**

Follow this guide and you should be fine, but if you have any worries don't take chances; call on the professionals.

WATCH THE VIDEO

Watch a video tutorial by visiting po.st/FormuBleed

YOUR EXPERT

AL VINES

Tech manager for i-ride. Born with Allen keys in his hand, Al loves a challenge. Just don't ask him to get on a chairlift; he prefers solid ground.



TOOLS FOR THE JOB

● Formula bleed kit (FD50902-00), Formula pad spacer, unworn pads, fresh Dot 4 brake fluid, Torx T10 key, Allen keys, paper towels, disc brake cleaner (Isopropyl alcohol), nitrile gloves, safety glasses.



01 Formula recommends removing the brake from the bike before bleeding. This isn't always convenient though. Whether the brake is on or off the bike, position the lever as shown before starting. You need to have plenty of meat on your pads — you may wish to have a pair reserved specifically for bleeding in case you spill brake fluid on them. Fit a Formula pad spacer, or similar, between the pads.



02 Fill one syringe with 15ml of Dot 4 from a fresh bottle; this is the caliper syringe (syringe 1). Put 5ml in the other — the master cylinder/lever syringe (syringe 2). Make sure there are no air bubbles in either syringe or the hoses.

SYRINGE 1

SYRINGE 2

TOP TIP

Dot 4 fluid has a shelf life — check its use by date and use an unopened container



03 Remove the bleed-port screw from the caliper using a T10 Torx key. Screw syringe 1 into place.

TOP TIP

Make sure the O-rings on the bleed screws are in a good condition otherwise they could leak



04 Remove the bleed screw from the lever and attach syringe 2.

05

Pass fluid from syringe 1 to syringe 2. Keep a minimum of 5ml of fluid in syringe 1.



06

Keep syringe 2 upright, so as not to draw air into the system, and then draw up on syringe 1 to suck air bubbles out of the caliper.



07

This passes fluid from syringe 2 through the system and into syringe 1, forcing out air bubbles. Repeat steps 5-7 making sure the level of either syringe doesn't drop past 5ml. Stop when you are happy that no more bubbles are present in the system.



08

Push slightly on syringe 1 and in one swift movement remove the syringe and fit the bleed screw. Torque setting for the bleed screw is 1.5Nm.

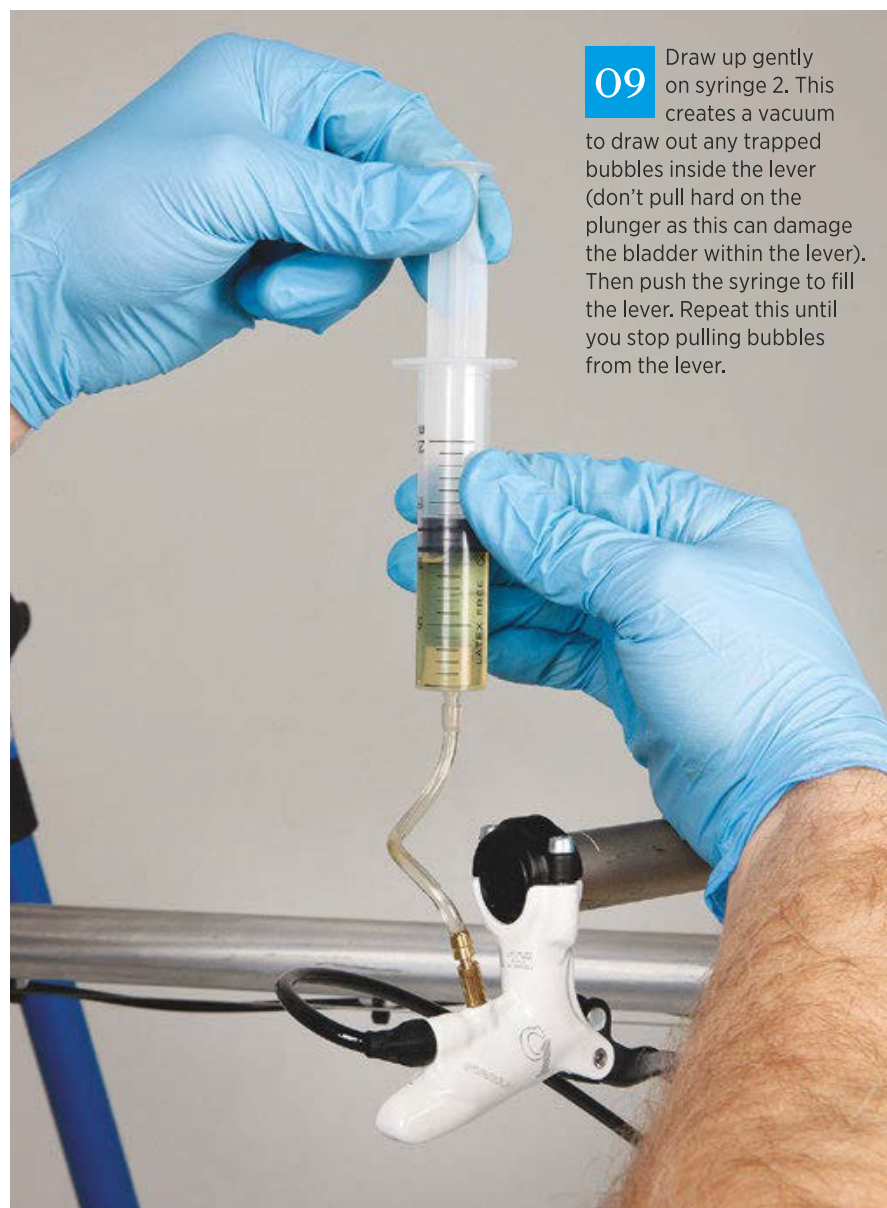


TOP TIP

Use a strategically positioned paper towel to catch any dribbles when removing syringes; this is especially important if you don't have spare pads

09

Draw up gently on syringe 2. This creates a vacuum to draw out any trapped bubbles inside the lever (don't pull hard on the plunger as this can damage the bladder within the lever). Then push the syringe to fill the lever. Repeat this until you stop pulling bubbles from the lever.



10

Squeeze the lever fully and push the syringe gently, while slowly releasing the lever. Repeat this process 3-4 times.



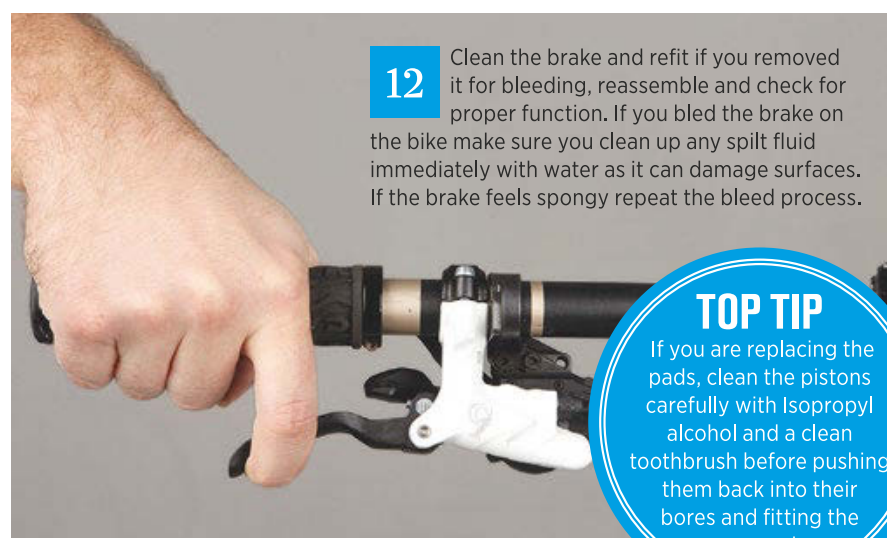
11

Remove the syringe from the lever and refit the bleed screw.



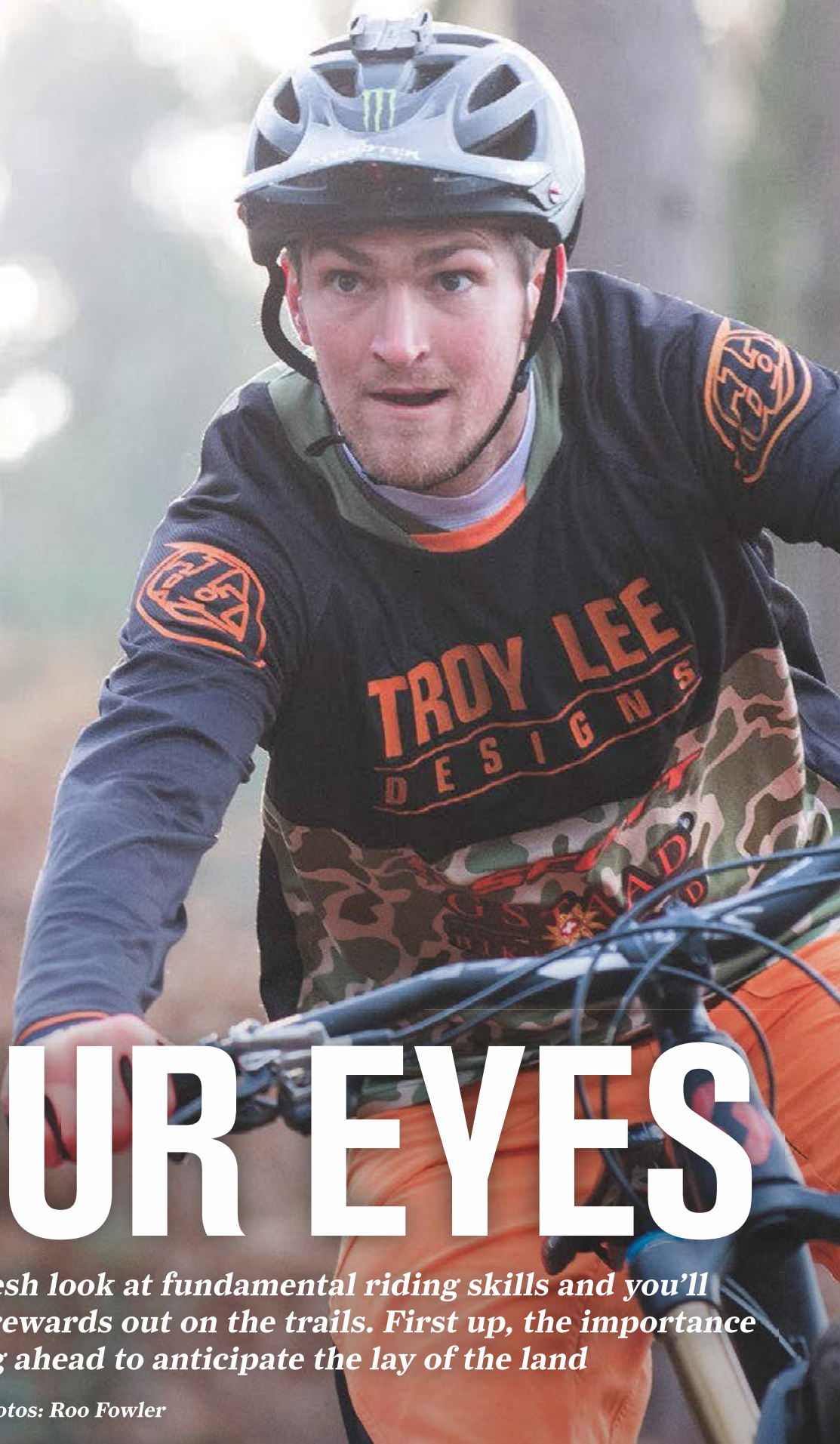
12

Clean the brake and refit if you removed it for bleeding, reassemble and check for proper function. If you bled the brake on the bike make sure you clean up any spilt fluid immediately with water as it can damage surfaces. If the brake feels spongy repeat the bleed process.



TOP TIP

If you are replacing the pads, clean the pistons carefully with Isopropyl alcohol and a clean toothbrush before pushing them back into their bores and fitting the new pads



SECRETS OF BETTER RIDING

USE YOUR EYES

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Behind every great rider is an understanding and appreciation of the foundations of good technique. Over the next few months, with the help of World Cup downhill racer Brendan Fairclough, we'll be taking a look at these fundamentals, and to help ingrain them into your subconscious, we've devised a number of skills drills to go away and practise on your local trails.

YOUR COACH

BRENDAN FAIRCLOUGH

Team: Gstaad-Scott
Trail bike: Scott Genius
Lives: Headley, Hampshire
Riding for: 21 years



Take a fresh look at fundamental riding skills and you'll reap the rewards out on the trails. First up, the importance of looking ahead to anticipate the lay of the land

Words and photos: Roo Fowler

It may sound obvious to say that looking at where you want to go is a particularly important — even crucial — skill on a bike. But it is one that is surprisingly difficult to master properly. It's something that is essential to good riding. No matter how many times you've heard it said before, it's usually one of the first things forgotten in the heat of the moment, when you start getting all out of shape.

Your body is hard-wired to a path dictated by your eyes, which makes looking ahead to the right areas one of the most important elements of riding a bike fast and in control. And it applies whether you're looking at the line you want to take, or the obstacle you want to avoid. So if your eyes stray from the path of righteousness, you'll be doubly punished!

For example, if you're riding across a camber and spot a root that might spit your rear wheel off the trail, keeping yourself fixated on it will make you tense up and be thrown off balance when you do hit it. However, if you are looking ahead and focusing on what's beyond the root, you may not even notice the impact. If you do slide, you'll be so committed to moving forward that the necessary corrections will come instinctively — and that's the key to freeing up your mind to concentrate on becoming a better rider.

The aim this month is to really hammer home the importance of looking ahead in order to spot the line you want to take and any obstacles you need to avoid, so that, by the time you reach that point, you already know what to do and have no need to take your eyes off the trail ahead. First, though, let's run

BREND OG SAYS
“Visualise a rider in front that you’re chasing — it keeps your focus in front and your eyes pointed in the right place”

GET RID OF THE BLINKERS

Before even turning a pedal, make sure your riding kit does not handicap you.

Check that there is nothing obstructing your view; one classic problem is a helmet visor that’s tilted too low, which means it acts as a blinker and prevents you from looking far enough down the trail. If it’s loose and keeps dropping down, sort it out! If you ride with glasses or

goggles, make sure these don’t get in the way either.

Check your pack too, if you wear one. Bulky packs can ride up your back and push your helmet down. Worse still, this typically happens on the steepest and most technical section of trail! Stand up off the bike and bend over like you’re trying to reach your toes. Look ahead and shake about; if you feel your pack



hit your helmet, adjust it, find a different one or try riding without a pack altogether.



BREND OG SAYS
“Goggles can be great for keeping wind and dirt out of your eyes, and to stop you looking straight down — but make sure they don’t drop down to restrict your view ahead”

You’ll be so committed to moving forward the necessary corrections will come instinctively

through where you should and shouldn’t be looking, and then we’ll give you a drill to practise on your local trails that should really drum in the benefits of looking ahead. Along the way we’ve got some pointers from Brendog, and there’s even a video to show you how it’s done.



TECHNIQUE

See that piece of paper on the tree? You need to be looking there. Don't focus on the roots!

WHERE TO LOOK

■ AT THE TRAIL AHEAD

This is where you should always be looking, although how far ahead depends on your speed; if it's a technical slow-speed section then only a few metres in front is fine, but if you're flying down some trail centre singletrack at 30mph, you need to be looking as far ahead as you can see, with quick scans of the foreground for reassurance. Sometimes the trail you're about to ride is not actually all in front of you; there may be a hairpin that tucks back just below. If you're traversing a hill and see a trail down below, it's a good sign that there may be a sharp turn ahead.

■ WHERE YOU WANT TO GO

If there's an obvious smooth line through some rocks, that's where you want to look, but once you've reached it your eyes should already be looking ahead at the next obstacle. Trust in your instinct and experience to get you through the rocks. You could think of this as exact points on a trail that you want to hit; look at where you want to end up, then at the next point, then the next, joining the dots as you go. To get that flow at speed you should be working at least two points ahead.

■ AT THE RIDER IN FRONT

If you're riding with a mate, use them to help judge where the trail is going next. Treat them as if they are an early warning system. They can give you clues as to the grip levels, line choice, the direction of the next corner, how tight it is and when to set up for it. If you're the lead rider, you'll have to improvise and deal with things much more quickly.

■ THE LANDING

If you're going over a jump or drop, getting your

Look around the corner on hairpins. Don't just swivel your eyes, turn your head!



■ AT THE EXIT OF A CORNER

While cornering you should always be looking for the exit of the corner — this helps you know when to straighten the bike back up and get on the gas. If the corner suddenly tightens, you'll have more time to react and adjust your speed or lean angle. As soon as you can see beyond the exit, then you should have already dealt with the corner in your mind and be getting ready for the next section.

wheels to land in the right place, compared to the wrong place, can often be a matter of only a few inches. So spot where you're heading as soon as you see it and be ready to move the bike underneath you a little if you need to clear a root or rock. Once you land, change your focus back to the trail ahead.

BREND OG SAYS

"Let your reactions deal with handling the bike. Once committed to a section of trail, the best thing you can do is focus on the exit and let your instincts deal with what's under the wheels"

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TECHNIQUE

WHERE NOT TO LOOK

■ AT THE FRONT WHEEL

This is an all too common habit, particularly when the trail starts to get hectic and you feel out of your comfort zone. Not only does it mean you are unprepared for an impending obstacle, but looking at the front wheel affects your balance, making hazards harder to negotiate when they appear.

■ DON'T STARE AT OBSTACLES

It's easy to fixate on impending nastiness, but if you look directly at that slippery root or big pine tree, chances are you will hit it. By all means use your peripheral vision to scan for, and take note of, any such obstacles, but you should immediately look to the route you need to avoid them. Remember, where you look is where you go.

■ DISTRACTIONS

You're riding an inherently unstable machine in an environment with constantly changing grip, and obstacles that are never alike. If you hear a strange noise from your bike or there's something unusual at the side of the trail, ignore it! The same can be said of a rider behind; pretend they're not there. Your thoughts and eyes should be focused on what's coming, not what's going on behind you.

BREND OG SAYS
"Remember that your eyes only move so much, so turn your head to really get a good view around a corner"



WATCH THE VIDEO
 Let Brendan show you how it's done — just go to po.st/mtbsecrets1

HOMEWORK TIME!

It can be tough to override your natural instincts and look further ahead down the trail. To train your brain into a new way of thinking, we've come up with a simple exercise to try for yourself. Get this technique ingrained in your riding and you'll reap the rewards for years to come.

■ Find a section of trail that's fairly rough, but well within your ability. It should be tough enough to test you without being so technical that you freeze up altogether. It doesn't need to be massive — three or four metres long will do. Stand at the start of the section and pick an object at the furthest point down the trail that you can see.



The spot: Brendan pins up his marker

It's actually a good idea to put a marker up. Use a piece of paper stuck to a tree next to the trail so that you have something really obvious to pick out.

As you approach the technical section, spot the marker and keep your eyes fixed on it all the way through the section.

As you gain confidence in what's happening beneath your wheels, try riding the section faster and faster, or



picking a more technical trail.

You can apply this to corners, too. Put a marker up at the furthest point on the inside of the corner as

you turn in, then one on the exit. Join these two points up with your eyes as you negotiate the turn. Faster sections are worth practising

as well; when a trail opens up and speed increases you'll need to get used to looking way further ahead instead of just a few metres.

MOUNTAIN BIKE RIDER
mbr

READ IT RIDE IT



ON THE GO...

Available to download at www.mbr.co.uk/digital-edition



Tested

CRANK BROTHERS COBALT 3 29ER WHEELS

£699.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 782g front/982g rear (29er with 15mm front axle/12 x 142mm rear)
• Available in 29in and 650b • Two-year warranty • Contact: extrauk.co.uk

Crank Brothers offers wheels for every type of riding; the Cobalt range is intended for cross-country and trail use. There are four Cobalt models — 1, 2, 3 and 11. The latter gets a carbon rim but the single figure wheels all feature an aluminium hoop, which has recently been widened by 2mm to 21mm (internal), deepened slightly and the central I-beam shape has been removed. Instead, the extra material has been redistributed throughout the profile.

As part of the redesign, the height of the rim has been reduced and the bead hook has been made smaller, which I hoped would make tyre fitting easier — one of my pet hates is straining to get tyres on and off with cold and wet fingers. Unfortunately I still experienced a few stubborn beads, so the problem hasn't been completely cured.

At 782g front, 982g rear, these wheels are a respectable weight, but

not super-light for what is essentially a XC wheelset. They come standard with QR axles but there are adaptors for 15mm front hub, and 10mm and 12mm rear, in the box, along with tubeless valves. They are SRAM 1x11 compatible, but you'll need to buy an XD driver body and end-cap kit for around £84.99.

Crank Brothers employs 12 pairs of spokes per wheel, with each one screwing directly into extra-long aluminium nipples mounted to the hubs. These nipples meet the spokes roughly in the middle of the wheel, and with a splash of anodised colour make for a bold, striking design.

As well as the theoretical stiffness and strength, the spoke configuration has a few practical advantages. Firstly the spokes don't pierce the rim, so no tape is required to go tubeless. Secondly, using spoke pins (those extra-long nipples) means the spokes themselves are all the same length — so if you are inclined

to carry spares, you'll only need one length. They also use a standard spoke key for adjustment, a big plus for trailside tweaking.

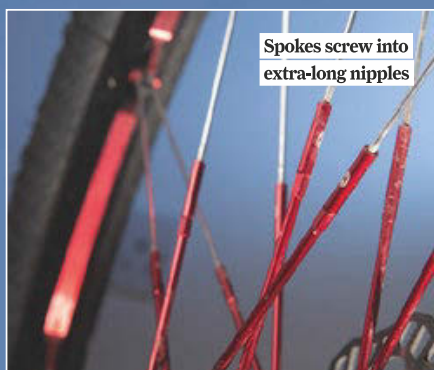
The Cobalt wheelset is categorised as 'XC Race', with the lightest overall weight in the range, so I was interested in how they would cope in nasty conditions over demanding terrain. And I was impressed with the ride straight off. They accelerate quickly with only a little lateral flex noticeable under hard sprinting, and the freehub has provided reliable pick-up throughout the test.

Given my past experience with Crank Brothers products I was pessimistic about the durability, but so far I'm happy to have been proved wrong — whatever the company has done to improve these wheels seems to have worked. They have survived a wrist-breaking crash in the deepest Highlands along with several thousand kilometres around Scotland. There isn't even a hint of bearing wear, the alloy freehub body is still working perfectly and they remain arrow-straight. Considering what I've put them through, that's mighty impressive. The price is high, of course, but not only are they reliable and strong, they are eye-catching and well-finished too.

Andy McCandlish



Rim is lower with smaller bead hook



Spokes screw into extra-long nipples

YOUR TESTERS



JANET COULSON

Her mum has just bought a house opposite, so strangely doing a bit more riding than normal



DANNY MILNER

Still can't get a bike in the back of the Lotus so considering fitting a rack to the girlfriend's Vespa



ANDY MCCANDLISH

Not riding due to six feet of snow so built a wind farm in the back garden to burn off spare energy



ROO FOWLER

Back on the Orange 5 after injuring his back playing squash. Yes squash, the game of fools!



BEN SMITH

Testing downhill vests this month. He thinks they make him look buff. Ben, they're man-boobs!

77 DESIGNZ FREESOLO ISCG05 CHAIN DEVICE

£39

SPECIFICATION Weight: 33g • ISCG old or ISCG 05 • Contact: 77designz.com

Although narrow/wide chainrings have revolutionised drivetrain security — and virtually eliminated the possibility of a dropped chain — they're not 100 per cent foolproof. I've been running narrow/wide rings for a couple of years now and while I can count the number of derailed chains I've experienced on one hand, they can and do fall off. For complete peace of mind, particularly if you're racing, it's worth considering a

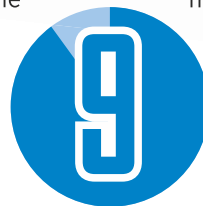
minimal guide, such as the Freesolo.

Made by a small German company called 77Designz, it forms the backbone of a range of sleek chain retention solutions that mount to your frame using the ISCG tabs or the high front derailleur fixture. This particular model bolts to only two tabs, meaning it can be installed without removing the crank. And it's really simple to fit, which

is good news, especially seeing as it came with no instructions.

The chain squeezes between two open plastic sliders, but the extra friction is minimal and totally imperceptible when riding. It's smooth, silent and secure, weighs virtually nothing and comes highly recommended.

Danny Milner



DEITY T-MO ENDURO CARBON BAR

£84.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 210g • Width: 735mm • Colours: gloss black with white, grey, red, green, purple or blue graphics • Contact: hotlines-uk.com

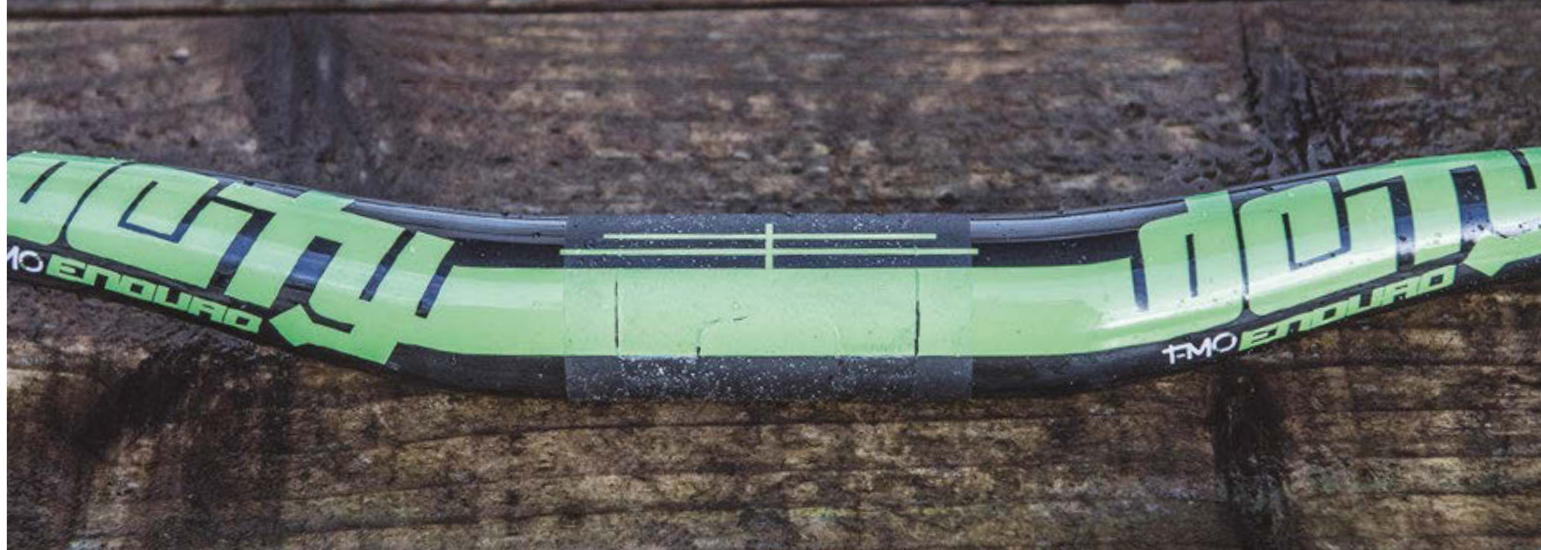
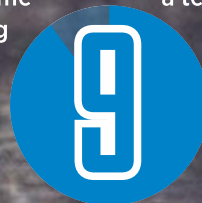
As the name suggests, this Tracy Moseley signature bar is designed for enduro riding, which means it's tough enough to withstand hits without adding too many grams to your bike. The carbon construction also offers a good level of damping to reduce hand fatigue caused by trail chatter. I did some full-day rides on rocky terrain and the extra cushioning really helped me ride with more confidence.

The bar is in no way women-specific but the 735mm width was great for me, offering plenty of leverage without feeling like I was riding a Harley, and keeping the risk of clipping trees to a minimum —

which is an important factor on my tight, twisty, tree-lined local trails in the Scottish Borders.

The 15mm rise keeps the front end low — often a problem with longer-travel bikes if you're 5ft 4in, as I am. There's a textured stem-clamp surface to reduce twisting or spinning at an inconvenient moment, and for the fashionistas this bar comes in six different colour graphic options, ranging from grey to lime green. All in all, a nicely designed carbon bar that inspires confidence and looks great too.

Janet Coulson



SCORES ON THE DOORS

**What mbr
ratings mean**
*Our grading
system explained*

1

2

3

4

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10

1-4 Something's wrong. It's rare, but sometimes a product will have a design flaw or some other weakness that means we can't recommend it. Steer clear.

5-6 OK — one or two faults but it has potential.

7 Good — worth considering.

8 Very good — for the money, we'd buy it.

9 Excellent — a slight mod or two and it might be perfect.

10 Simply the best — we couldn't fault it.

NEW PRODUCTS

ENDURA HUMVEE CONVERTIBLE JACKET

£84.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 424g • Black, green or red • Sizes S-XXL • Contact: endurasport.com

I'm 6ft 4in, so sizing is always an issue, let alone water-proofness. Happily this jacket from Endura gets most things right. Quite why it's called the Humvee I'm not too sure; it's certainly not hugely bulky. The convertible part in the name refers to the sleeves and back panel, which can zip off to create a gilet for drier conditions. In practice, I never felt the need to do this.

The jacket material is certainly waterproof, but not hugely breathable. Thankfully it is fairly well ventilated with a mesh back and rear flap, which helps to keep air circulating. As a cold and wet weather jacket, it's excellent but in milder conditions, you'll get hot.

In terms of sizing, the medium fitted me remarkably well with sleeves longer than many other brands. Once stowed (it packs into its own back pocket), it takes up very little space in a pack but is too big for most pockets. There are two zip pockets on the front, which neatly hide the waist adjustment toggles and one large rear pocket, with the usual Velcro adjustments on the wrists. It's also got reflective sections so it's ideal for night riding.

All in all, this is a great jacket to have in your pack for when the heavens open in the colder months.

Roo Fowler

9



FOX SIDEWINDER POLAR GLOVES

£34.99

SPECIFICATION Sizes: S-XXL • Fluro-yellow only • Contact: foxhead.com/uk

I got these gloves in autumn and soon decided they were just too warm. Fast forward to winter and I'm now not so sure. There's an insulating fleece layer, which works down to about 4°C; below that, my fingers lose sensation. A single-layer palm offers plenty of feel without bunching, and the fingers are articulated, with rubber grippers too. Nice, but more insulation is needed.

Jason Hardy

8

SPECIALIZED WOMEN'S 2FO FLAT MTB SHOE

£90

SPECIFICATION Colours: purple with yellow • Sizes: 36-42 • Contact: specialized.com

2FO is short for 'foot out, flat out', and these shoes for riding flat pedals should have you doing just that. The all-important contact point between pedal and shoe is managed by Specialized's new SlipNot rubber, apparently developed in the company's tyre lab. The tread pattern consists of hexagonal knobs; while riding on seriously rough and rocky terrain, my foot never slipped once. Traction when scrambling hike-a-bike sections was good too, despite the 2FOs being noticeably more rigid than many shoes designed for riding flats. This stiffer sole added greatly to comfort, security and power transfer, although some other **mbr** testers reckon they lack the feel of Five Ten's Freeriders and didn't like the thick sole, which they said created a perched feeling on the bike. Admittedly, feel is somewhat subjective with flat shoes.

The Body Geometry fit is excellent, with no heel lift. A super-solid toecap offers excellent protection. Similarly, the side cuffs and overall fabric of the upper are both tough and easy to wipe down after muddy rides. The casual look of the laces is made practical by the clever little detail of the 'Lacelock' — an elasticated loop on the tongue — through which you thread the laces to avoid them catching in your chain.

There is a good range of smaller women's sizes — 36-42 — which is great news for me, being a UK size 3. Overall, these are now a firm favourite.

Janet Coulson

8



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BONTRAGER RALLY HELMET

£79.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 401g • Colours: black, white, grey/yellow, orange • Sizes: S, M, L • Contact: bontrager.com

You may have already read about Bontrager's new Rally helmet in January's Most Wanted section. You may also have laughed at the ridiculous Biggles arrangement pictured, with a pair of goggles tucked up beneath the peak. Absurd though this may look, in practice it works exceptionally well; stashing them under the peak reduces the chance of them steaming up on climbs, and helps keep them clean. And using goggles not only keeps mud and grit out of our eyes, but tears too. Not tears of laughter, but from streaming eyes.

Thankfully, there's more to love about the Rally helmet than its goggle/peak set-up. The fit, thanks to the Headmaster retention system and ratchet knob, is superb, with pressure-point-free comfort. Tension can even be adjusted with one hand while on the move and the fixed position strap dividers sit perfectly beneath the ear.

Build-quality is excellent, and at £80 it's great value for money. The only downside is that, at 400g, it's a bit on the heavy side, and the deep internal vents produce some truly spectacular helmet hair.

Danny Milner



HOPE TECH ENDURO WHEELSET

£380

SPECIFICATION Weight: 940g front/1,060g rear • Available in all three wheel sizes • Front axle options — QR, 9mm, 15mm, 20mm. Rear axle options — QR, 135 x 10mm, 135 x 12mm and 142 x 12mm • Conventional or XD Driver freehub. • Contact: hopetech.com

With a name like Tech Enduro, it's clear what these wheels are designed for: hard and fast trail riding.

Out of the box, it was nice to see a couple of spare spokes provided — especially as these particular wheels use the straight-pull variety. I set mine up as 15mm front and 142 x 12mm rear using Hope's brilliant adapters, which are tool-free and take only a few seconds to swap.

I tested the spoke tension and was surprised at how slack they felt, but I left them as they came and fitted them on my Orange Five ready for their intended purpose. At 23mm, the internal width on the tubeless-compatible aluminium rims makes for a good tread profile with 2.3in tyres. The Pro 2 Evo hubs are built to Hope's usual high standards and feature that signature raucous freehub ratchet.

At 2kg they aren't super-light, but are in the ballpark considering the build and price. Immediate impressions were of a solid, stiff wheelset that was more than up to the job in hand. I only have good things to say about how they ride; they don't ping off roots and I didn't notice much flex when loaded in tight berms, they just do their job and give you confidence to do yours. A couple of rides in, however, and some of the spokes were starting to work their way loose. After truing and re-tensioning, they were good for a few more rides, but then things seemed to start loosening again. I tightened all the spokes further and since then they've been fine.

Apart from the tension issue, I've had no other problems. These are excellent wheels available in just about every wheel size and axle combo. If you ride hard but have a limited budget, these are a great buy — just make sure you carry a spoke key.

Roo Fowler





MAVIC STRATOS H20 PANT

£76

SPECIFICATION Weight: 200g • Sizes: XXS-XXL • Contact: mavic.co.uk

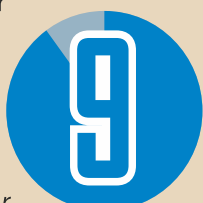
I'm a big fan of waterproof trousers for winter riding. Not only do they keep your legs warm and dry, you don't need to spend ages back in the car park cleaning up before you get changed.

And, in the Mavic Stratos H20, I've found my new favourite pants. Firstly they're light. At only 200g, I barely notice I'm wearing them, although thankfully I haven't actually left the house without them on. Secondly the tapered cut allows plenty of freedom to move, yet minimises the chance of any fabric getting caught in the drivetrain. And finally, the

waterproof DWR coating is top-notch — still performing perfectly after a dozen washes with pure soap — and I've yet to feel the slightest bit clammy, which is testament to their breathability.

Of course, there is a catch: at £145, the Stratos pant is stratospherically priced. In context, it's a superior product to the already excellent Altura Attack trouser, but whether it's £45 better is open to debate.

Danny Milner



GROUP
TEST

ARMOURED UNDERSHIRTS

Lightweight protection ideal for uplift days or Batman impressions

BLISS ARG 1.0 LD TANK TOP

£129.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 612g • Sizes: XS-XXL
• Contact: madison.co.uk

Being just a back protector, the ARG 1.0 offers less thorough protection than the other two here. The broad, flexible Armourgel back plate offers good coverage, absorbing a claimed 80 per cent of impact energy, and is heavily perforated for ventilation. The side-fastening zip stops the top of the zip rubbing on your neck. It's the easiest to get on and off. Fit is on the snug side and the padding stays put. Despite the size of the big back plate, it's not too sweaty.



O'NEAL STV SHORT SLEEVE

£89.99

SPECIFICATION Weight: 407g • Sizes: S-XL
• Contact: oneal.eu

The STV features lightweight biofoam padding and is the lightest on test. The padding covers shoulders, chest, kidney and back, and is fairly unobtrusive. The shoulder pads are the thickest and meet EN1621 standard. A snug fit, the thin armour sits close to the body, where the pads can get quite sweaty. Alas, the flimsiness of the back padding is just not up to the standard of the others.



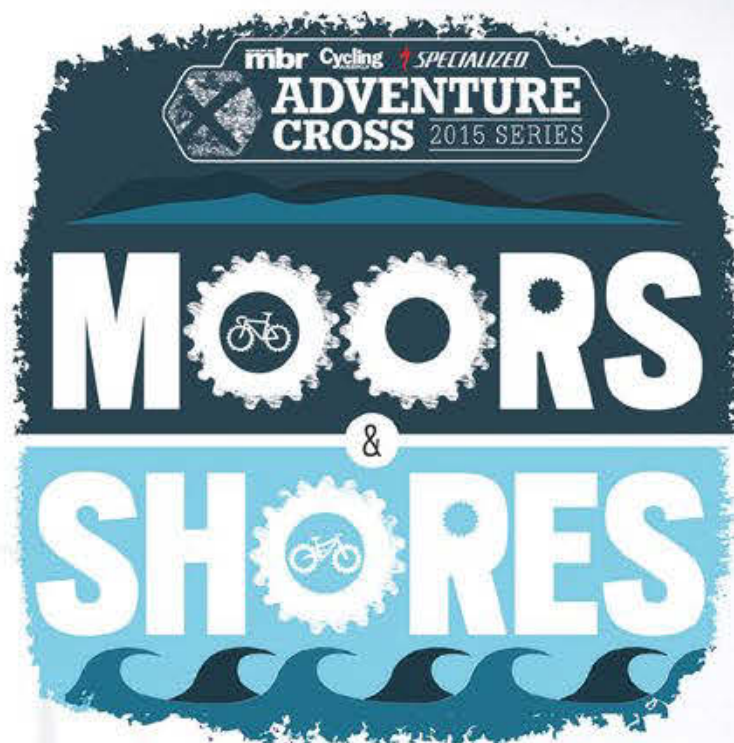
RACEFACE FLANK CORE

£129.95

SPECIFICATION Weight: 519g • Sizes S-XXL
Contact: silverfish-uk.com

The Flank is the only shirt here with D3O armour in the back and shoulders. Soft and highly flexible in normal use, D3O hardens on impact for greater protection. Clever stuff. The flexibility of this armour is the Flank's strong point; it's easily the most comfortable here. The back and shoulder armour are removable for washing. Fit is snug; the armour stays in place, breathability is good and it's comfy too.





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CUMBRIA
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This month's routes

WHERE TO RIDE AND EXPLORE

01 MEDIUM ROUTE

BALLATER, CAIRNGORMS

21.5km (13.4 miles)

Of all the top biking areas in Scotland — and there are a few — Ballater and its surroundings are a hidden gem. It doesn't get the visitor pressure of the northern Cairngorms but has all the excellent trails, winding woodland singletrack and hilltop exposure of its more popular counterparts.

This ride is a new and improved version of a local classic known as the Green Mile, so called because it takes in some gloriously vivid green woodland as part of the descent back to the River Dee. Brown Mile would better describe the state of the trail at the moment, thanks to marks left by heavy machinery. Still, it's only a temporary glitch.

Almost straight off the line you are into some narrow and indistinct forest singletrack, winding between trees and popping over roots as you progress towards the foot of the Coyles of Muick. A forest road is the easiest way to gain altitude, and the reward for this effort is the start of a beautiful section of singletrack. Add in the views north-west to the Cairngorms and you have a unique spot that is worth the work done in seeking it out.

Sometimes fast, sometimes slower and more picky through technical sections, it is always superb. The Green Mile section is a fast drop down through woodland on a forest track, followed by another beautiful spin through tree-lined singletrack, populated by crumbling walls and loamy trail.

A final spin along the fast riverside singletrack pops you right back into Ballater with barely a sniff of tarmac, ready for a coffee stop.

■ **Download a free route at po.st/BallaterGPS**

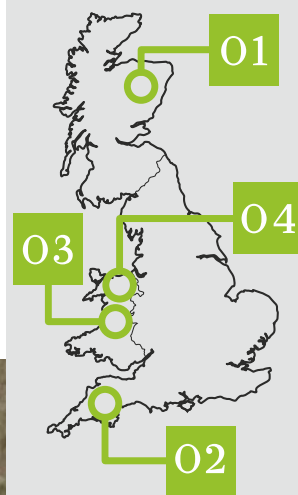
BRITAIN'S
BEST
SINGLETRACK



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FEATURE!
p52

Ballater's Green Mile:
Scottish singletrack
at its best

LOCATOR



02 EASY ROUTE

OKEHAMPTON COMMON, DARTMOOR

16km (10 miles)

Starting in built-up Okehampton, the Granite Way — a well-surfaced multi-use trail — makes quick work of spanning the gap between town and country, and before you know it, you're climbing up onto the moors with the imposing Sourton Tor towering overhead. It's all about the return leg really — first on the moor, then on some fun trails through some old mine workings. There's even wooded singletrack to enjoy before the final blast back into civilisation.

03 MEDIUM ROUTE

RADNOR FOREST, MID WALES

17km (10.5 miles)

The Radnor Forest isn't an obvious place to head for when weighing up the options for some Mid Wales miles. But it delivers every time, both in terms of riding and scenery. What's more, it has a wild feel that makes every outing feel a little pioneering. This is a great little ride but it's no pushover, with nearly 800m of ascent in its 17km. The highlights include a rampy drop from the forest and some superb sinuous singletrack, as well as some amazing views.

04 HARD ROUTE

CADAIR IDRIS, SNOWDONIA

16km (10 miles)

Nearly as tough as Snowdon, and just as rewarding, an ascent and descent of Cadair should be on every mtb'er's bucket list. There's no logical circuit to be made so it's an up and down route but this shouldn't deter anybody — use the climb to take in the scenery. It's pretty full-on near the top, though — padding is recommended. And it's not a great route for a busy summer weekend, so choose your times carefully and respect other trail users.

OKEHAMPTON COMMON, DARTMOOR

16km (10 miles)

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EASY
ROUTE



EASY ROUTE

OKEHAMPTON COMMON, DARTMOOR

16km (10 miles)

WAY TO GO

01 **START (OS191/SX592944) Okehampton YHA**

Turn R out of the car park then immediately L onto a drive. Then turn L onto a switchback track that leads up onto the Granite Way. Turn R and follow this past Meldon Quarry, over Meldon Viaduct and beneath 2 bridges before dropping to cross a road. Keep SA beneath another bridge and at the next, turn R, go through a gate, then turn L across a bridge.

02 **(SX536902) Sourton. Distance so far: 7.6km**

Continue onto open ground and keep SA as the wall veers L. Turn L onto a clear grassy track and follow this towards trees. When it meets the wall, follow it R to drop to a gateway (large stone gatepost). Go through and keep SA to another gate. Keep SA on a walled track to a waymark R to Meldon Reservoir. Follow this diagonally up and at a wall corner bear L to follow a rough track out into the open where it keeps SA to drop to a road.

03 **(SX561917) Road near Meldon Reservoir. Distance so far: 11.1km**

Keep SA to drop into the valley bottom then look carefully for a footbridge on the R. Cross and bear L up a ramp, then continue along the top of a bank to a gate on the R. Go through and climb to the road, where you turn L. Continue for 200m and turn R onto a waymarked BW (not the footpath which you reach earlier). Follow this up to a junction and bear L to descend to the road. Cross the bridge over the A30 then take the gravel drive on the R.

04 **(SX567131) Track/Road Junction by A30. Distance so far: 13.3km**

Follow this to a farm and keep R, through a gate, to go around the yard and onto a rough track. Continue to the golf course and keep SA (waymarked BW) to cross the course and join a gravel track. At the end, keep L to follow the drive (tarmac BW) out to the road. Turn R to climb steeply and then L onto a waymarked BW that leads back to where you joined the Granite Way on the way out.

TOTAL DISTANCE: 16KM (10 MILES) TOTAL ASCENT: 370M (1,214FT)



GETTING THERE

The route description starts from the parking area behind the Youth Hostel, a short distance south of the Okehampton Town Centre (OS191/SX592944). The Granite Way is well-signed. The town itself is just off the A30, a few miles west of the end of the M5 at Exeter. The Okehampton railway station is next to the youth hostel.

BEST TIME TO GO

The outward leg is well-surfaced and rideable all year but the return across the moors will be a little softer and tougher in wetter conditions.

MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

Memory Map V5 OS Landranger (1:50,000) Region 1

OS Landranger Series (1:50,000)
191 Okehampton & North Dartmoor

OS Outdoor Leisure Series
(1:25,000) 28 Dartmoor

South West Mountain Biking
by Nick Cotton (Vertebrate Publishing)

Mountain Bike Rides In & Around Exmoor & Dartmoor by Max Darkins (Rough Ride Guides)

REFRESHMENTS

There's plenty in town.

FACILITIES

Okehampton has everything you could need.

Bearslake Inn at Lake Sourton for food, drink or rooms, 01837 861334, bearslakeinn.com

Youth Hostel at start, 01837 53916, yha.org.uk

Okehampton TIC, 01837 53020.

OTHER OPTIONS

Check out the Easy from Princetown in the March 2014 Issue or a great Hard from Postbridge in August 2013.

MEDIUM ROUTE

RADNOR FOREST, MID WALES

17km (10.5 miles)

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MEDIUM ROUTE

RADNOR FOREST, MID WALES

17km (10.5 miles)



WAY TO GO

- 01 START (OS148/SO215607) School Lane, New Radnor**
Ride back into town and turn R and then R again onto Water Street. Turn R again at Water Street Farm and follow this to the main road. Keep SA up Mutton Dingle and climb steeply up to a fork at the edge of a forestry plantation. Bear L onto a grassy trail and follow this around the forest, still climbing. At the top, keep SA to drop slightly to the head of Ystol Bach Valley.
- 02 (SO205629) Gate at the head of Ystol Bach. Distance so far: 3.3km**
Go through the gate and up and R until the track runs out close to the edge of forestry. Keep SA to locate a stile that leads onto a forest track. Turn L and ignore fork to the L after 500m and then two to the R. Follow the edge of the forest up to a junction by a fence corner. Bear R (usually muddy) and follow this for 200m to a turning on the L. Take this out of the forest to a gate.
- 03 (SO182645) Gate at edge of forest. Distance so far: 8.3km**
Keep SA with the fence to the R to a gate. Go through and continue with the fence now to the L. Drop to meet a broad track and turn L onto it, then immediately and very easy to miss, turn L again onto a faint track that leads steeply uphill. Push up to a gate and keep SA to loop around the head of a narrow valley to another gate. Now keep SA again, crossing another grassy track then dropping into a deep valley, where the path improves.
- 04 (SO180627) Stream in Davy Morgan's Dingle. Distance so far: 12.6km**
Climb away and traverse around the hillside to join a good track. Drop to a gate and keep SA with a fence to your L to drop to a footbridge/ford. Cross and fork L onto a tarmac drive, which becomes dirt. Stay with this around the hillside to a tarmac lane and drop to the R to return to New Radnor. Turn L to the bottom of Mutton Dingle, and then retrace your earlier tracks back to the car park.

TOTAL DISTANCE: 17KM (10.5 MILES) TOTAL ASCENT: 770M (2,526FT)

GETTING THERE

There's limited parking by the school in School Lane on west side of New Radnor (OS148/SN215607). There are a few other spaces in the village if these are taken. New Radnor is on the A44, halfway between Kington and Llandrindod Wells, 40 miles west of the M5 at Worcester. Rail access isn't that practical.

BEST TIME TO GO

A better dry-weather route as the moorland sections are soft and would chop up easily as well becoming very hard work. High and exposed so check the weather on the day. And note that navigation would be difficult in poor visibility.

MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

Memory Map V5 OS Landranger (1:50,000) Region 3

OS Landranger Series (1:50,000) 148 Presteigne & Hay-on-Wye

OS Explorer Series (1:25,000) 200 Elan Valley

Wales Mountain Biking by Tom Hutton (Vertebrate Publishing). For other routes in the area check out roughrides.co.uk

REFRESHMENTS

Nothing on the route.

FACILITIES

Good Ales in the Radnor Arms, New Radnor.

B&B in the Swan Hotel, Kington, 01544 230510.

Old Station Cafe down the road at the campsite.

The nearest YHA is at Leominster, 0845 371 9127, yha.org.uk

Kington TIC, 01547 529424.

OTHER OPTIONS

Llanwrtyd Wells and the Irfon Forest isn't too far — see March 2015 for a great Hard. Or head south to the Black Mountains and Brecon Beacons where there's plenty of top-notch stuff to explore.



CADAIR IDRIS, SNOWDONIA

16km (10 miles)

Maps created with Memory-Map © Crown copyright Ordnance Survey 100034184



03

02

01

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memory-map
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HARD ROUTE

CADAIR IDRIS, SNOWDONIA

16km (10 miles)

WAY TO GO

01 **START (OS124/SH671088) Llanhifangel-y-Pennant**

Turn R to ride up the road and pass the farm buildings at Tynyfach before crossing the bridge over the Afon Cadair. You'll pass the remains of Mary Jones's Cottage — great story — and then continue up the lane, keeping the barns and houses to your R, and go through a gate and on to another. Stay on the main track here and follow it ever upwards to a major track junction.

02 **(SH677121) Hafotty Gwastadfryn. Distance so far: 3.8km**

Ignore a good track to the R and continue to a fork where a waymark directs you R (north). Now continue around a few bends to another fork, where you keep R and continue up to a gate on the R. Go through and follow the grassy trail that eventually joins a fence. Keep ahead with the fence on the L to another gate. This leads onto a good trail. Traverse around the hill to eventually join a major path by a gate.

03 **(SH691135) Junction with Pony Path. Distance so far: 5.7km**

Turn R and follow this upwards. It's rideable in places and a push/carry in others. The final 50 vertical metres are almost a scramble in places, so there's no shame in leaving your bike here and walking to the summit without it. Once at the trig point, celebrate! Then retrace your outward tracks back down for almost 900m of descent.

TOTAL DISTANCE: 16KM (10 MILES) TOTAL ASCENT: 880M (2,887FT)



GETTING THERE

Llanhifangel-y-Pennant is just off the B4405, halfway between the A487 and the town of Tywyn. The junction itself is on the A487, halfway between Dolgellau and Machynlleth. Rail isn't a great option.

BEST TIME TO GO

Mostly good surfaces or rocky trails but there are a few soft sections that will be hard work in winter and will chop up with too much use. The top section from 3 is incredibly popular with walkers, so avoid busy weekends and holiday season or go for a sunrise/sunset ascent.

MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

Memory Map V5 OS Landranger (1:50,000) Region 3

OS Landranger (1:50,000) 124 Porthmadog & Dolgellau

OS Explorer (1:25,000) OL23: Cadair Idris & Bala Lake

Wales Mountain Biking by Tom Hutton (Vertebrate Publishing)

REFRESHMENTS

Take sarnies.

FACILITIES

Caffi'r Ceunant in Abergynolwyn for a cuppa.

Awesome B&B at Llety Brynawel Guest House in Pennal, near Machynlleth, 01654 791 206, lletybrynawel.co.uk

Independent hostel at Corris, 01654 761686, corrishostel.co.uk

Bunkhouse at Braich Goch, 01654 761229, braichgoch.co.uk

Camping near Minnfordd.

OTHER OPTIONS

Check out the Fford Ddu Hard from Dolgellau we ran in the January 2015 issue. Or how about a dose of Coed-y-Brenin or the Climachx at Machynlleth?

MEDIUM ROUTE

BALLATER, CAIRNGORMS

21.5km (13.4 miles)

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MEDIUM ROUTE

BALLATER, CAIRNGORMS

21.5km (13.4 miles)

WAY TO GO

01 **START (OS44/NO370957) Cycle Highlands car park.**

Leave Cyclehighlands car park to the front of the church, turn R down the A93 and then cross the bridge ahead over the Dee, turning R onto the B976. Follow the B976 for 1km where the road splits.

02 **(NO367948) Bridge of Muick.**

Distance so far: 1.5 km

Take the estate track forking off on the L just before the bridge, following it for 700m, staying R at the junction. When you pass some cottages on your right keep a very sharp eye on the L of the track for an indistinct singletrack heading into the woods. If you miss it don't worry, just keep following the track and take the next L. If you find the singletrack, follow it through the woods and pop out onto a track through the forest which leads out to a singletrack road. Take a L here, then a R down to the houses at Mill of Sterin.

03 **(NO349928) Mill of Sterin. Distance so far: 4.7 km**

Take the L turn off the road and onto another estate track. Follow for 400m until a forest road heads off on the R, follow this up the hill for the big climb. Take the first R, the next L and continue across the hillside steadily gaining height. Stay R at the next two junctions and climb to just short of the end of the track at Craig of Loinmuie.

04 **(NO330919) Craig of Loinmuie. Distance so far: 9.4km**

Cut L off the track onto the singletrack out of the woodland and onto the open hill. At the singletrack 'T- junction' you have the choice to turn L for a quick jaunt up The Coyles of Muick and back, or just turn R to continue the route. Follow the singletrack along the treeline for 3km before joining an estate track.

05 **(NZ331943) The Green Mile. Distance so far: 12.5km**

Drop onto the track and turn R, following the track down through the forest. This is usually a bright green (hence the local name) but when we rode it there had been some forestry which had rendered it more brown. Go over the gate, across the road then take the second gap in the wall into the forest singletrack, turning L at its first junction and then following ahead until the doubletrack running alongside the Dee. When you reach the footbridge, use this to cross the river, then follow the trail on the opposite bank all the way along the riverbank into Ballater and the finish.

TOTAL DISTANCE: 21.5KM (13.4 MILES) TOTAL ASCENT: 1,400M (4,593FT)

BRITAIN'S
BEST
SINGLETRACK

READ
THE
FEATURE!
p52

GETTING THERE

From the south follow the motorway system north to Stirling, then join the A9 north to Perth. From here, take the A93 north through Blairgowrie and over Glen Shee ski area before dropping down to Braemar and finally Ballater. Rail isn't an option.

BEST TIME TO GO

Ballater enjoys a pretty dry climate but is very cold and potentially snowy in winter. The best time would therefore be from spring to autumn.

MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

Memory Map V5 OS Landranger (1:50,000) Region 6

OS Landranger (1:50,000) 43
Braemar to Blair Atholl

OS Explorer (1:25,000) 403
Cairngorm & Aviemore

Scotland Mountain Biking — The Wild Trails Vols 1 & 2 by Phil McKane (Vertebrate Publishing)

REFRESHMENTS

There are a number of great cafes in the town. For dinner La Mangiatoia (01339 755999) Italian restaurant is hard to beat.

FACILITIES

Ballater has an excellent selection of facilities. Cycle Highlands (cyclehighlands.com) is superb and well stocked with everything from inner tubes to spanky new Santa Cruzes. Habitat (habitat-at-ballater.com) is a posh but good value bunkhouse and there is a campsite within the town for those on a budget. There's even a full-blown Hilton!

OTHER OPTIONS

The Glenlivet trails are 30 minutes to the north. Alternatively, zip along the glen to Scolty Hill above Banchory or the Kirkhill Forest nearer Aberdeen. The Lecht, just over the hill from Ballater, now offers mountain bike trails, and Glen Shee is following suit with lift-accessed trails.

LONG TERMERS

Countless hours on the trails make this the ultimate test of performance as well as reliability



JASON'S KONA PROCESS 134

£2,399 / 650b / konaworld.com



THE RIDER

JASON HARDY

Position Picture editor

Mostly rides Surrey Hills

Height 6ft 2in

Weight 101kg

THE BIKE

■ Mid-travel bike in the Kona Process range

■ Long front end, chunky rear

■ 134mm of travel with 140mm fork

■ 40mm stems on all four sizes

MONTH 4: Jason bemoans a lack of post length and wonders if a summer spent dodging pies was in vain

Now sit up at the back and pay attention, because this month is all about the numbers. Last year I managed to lose over 7.7kg (17lb) during the summer. It was a mixture of being sensible with my diet and commuting on my road bike during the half decent summer we had. Back then I had the Specialized Stumpjumper FSR Comp Evo 29 that weighed in at 13.65kg (30.1lb). Now I'm riding the Kona Process that weighs 14.98kg (33.02lb). So, after all my mung bean eating and beer avoiding, my total riding weight including the bike is really only 6.37kg (14.04lb) lighter. Keith Bontrager famously once said: 'Strong. Light. Cheap. Pick two'. With my previous observations about the stingy spec on the Kona, it seems I'm only able to pick strong so far...

Whilst I'm on a moan, the 100mm KS Eten R dropper post is seriously starting to grate. Not so long ago dropper posts were seen as a luxury part of a bike's spec, but these days they're

common currency on bikes over £1,500, so it might seem churlish to bemoan the presence of a dropper post here. Now, if I was 5ft 2in and riding a suitably small bike, then the 100mm drop would probably suffice, but for me at 6ft 2in and riding a size XL frame it's just not enough. The problem being, if I set the saddle height for efficient pedalling then drop it for descending or jumping it hits me in the chest. Alternatively, if I position the saddle lower for safe jumping it sees my knees screaming for mercy when winching uphill. OK, so I know I could raise the post within the frame (if there was a quick-release, which there isn't), but that would really negate the whole point of having a dropper post in the first place.

Rant over, the lever action on the KS post is the lightest I've ever experienced and the post has proven totally reliable so far. I still think there's a case for spec'ing a 125mm or 150mm dropper post on large and extra large bikes, though.

WHY IT'S HERE
It's big and burly, just like the rider!



DANNY'S SPECIALIZED CAMBER EVO 29

£2,000 / 29in / specialized.com

SPECIFICATION

Frame 6061 aluminum, 134mm travel
Shock RockShox Monarch R
Fork RockShox Sektor Silver TK Solo Air, 140mm travel
Wheels Shimano Deore hubs, WTB ST i23 TCS rims, Maxxis Ardent EXO TR 2.25in tyres
Drivetrain Shimano Deore 24/38t chainset, Shimano XT Shadow Plus r-mech, SRAM X5 f-mech, Shimano Deore shifters
Brakes Shimano Deore 180/160mm
Components Kona 760mm bar and 40mm stem, KS Eten R dropper, WTB Volt saddle
Sizes S, M, L, XL
Weight 14.98kg (33.02lb)

GEOMETRY

Size tested XL
Head angle 67.9°
Seat angle 68.7°
BB height 342mm
Chainstay 425mm
Front centre 778mm
Wheelbase 1,203mm
Down tube 732mm
Top tube 660mm
Reach 485mm



THE RIDER

DANNY MILNER

Position Deputy editor
Mostly rides Surrey Hills
Height 5ft 10in
Weight 72kg

THE BIKE

- 120mm-travel 29er with aggressive spec and geometry
- Evo model is slacker, lower, longer travel and gets wider bars and fatter tyres
- £200 cheaper for 2015

MONTH 4: A curious mix of cold weather and high pressure almost forces Danny to take drastic action

Would you urinate on your own bicycle? A strange question

perhaps, but when freezing temperatures play havoc with bike components, it's oft-heard advice. When my Camber Evo suffered a weather-related wobble on an icy trip to Bike Park Wales, things got so bad I even began to consider such desperate measures.

The day started badly. From the first run it was clear that the RockShox Reba RC fork was behaving very oddly; it was really firm at the top of the stroke, yet dived through the mid-stroke and bottomed out harshly. In other words, nothing like the performance I'd come to expect.

It had lost about half its air pressure too, so I kept topping it up, but the action didn't improve. In fact, it got worse, and I could rest all my weight through the fork without moving it a millimetre. Touch the brakes, however, and it would plummet through its travel and bottom out.

It was at this point that I noticed the dust wiper seal was now residing halfway up the left leg, and the cause of my woes started to become clear. The cold had affected the internal seals of the air spring to such a degree that air had escaped from the air chamber and become trapped in the lower leg. This would explain the static resistance, and the lack of support once the fork had started moving.

When the pressure got too much, it blew the seal clean out of the leg.

With the pressure relieved, and the seal pressed back into place with a tyre lever, the Reba worked perfectly again. And best of all, no flies were unzipped in the process.

■ Watch the video update at po.st/CamberVideo



Air spring tinkering didn't involve a sprinkling

WHY IT'S HERE
 Bike of the Year contender that's better value than ever before



KS 100mm dropper post works well but needs bigger range

IN THE SHED



Canyon Spectral AL 6.9 £1,699

29in



GT Sensor Carbon Expert £2,899.99

650b



Kona Process 134 £2,399

650b



Lapierre Zesty TR 329 £1,749.99

29in



Specialized Camber Evo 29 £2,000

29in

NEXT MONTH

South Downs mile-muncher Jim Clarkson gets his new wheels



Transition TransAm 29 £1,899

29in

DAVE'S GT SENSOR CARBON EXPERT

£2,899.99 / 650b / gtbicycles.com

GEOMETRY

Size tested L
Head angle 68.5°
Seat angle 73°
BB height 339mm
Chainstay 440mm
Front centre 730mm
Wheelbase 1,170mm
Down tube 670mm
Top tube 631mm



THE RIDER

DAVE ARTHUR

Position writer/tester
Mostly rides FOD/Wales
Height 5ft 11in
Weight 66kg

THE BIKE

- Modern long, low geometry with 130mm of rear travel and a 130mm fork
- Full carbon-fibre frame and swingarm with forged and CNC'd PathLink
- Well specced with reliable Shimano parts and KS LEV Integra dropper post
- Top-end bike from five-strong range starting at £1,499

MONTH 2: Dave's new longtermer's outclassing his previous test rig before he's even had the chance to boost the front travel...

I couldn't hide my disappointment when I discovered that the GT Sensor shipped with a 130mm-travel RockShox Revelation fork instead of the advertised 150mm version. After riding the regular 130mm Sensor at the launch I was really looking forward to seeing how the bigger fork would open up the potential of this bike. It turns out that GT had a very short production run of bikes shipped with the longer fork, before a change of heart prompted the switch back to 130mm, balancing travel front and rear.

All isn't lost though. As I write this update the postman has just delivered a travel upgrade kit for the RockShox Revelation Solo Air fork. Fitting it looks to be a straightforward task (see our video by visiting po.st/TravelChange), so by the next issue I'll have it installed and we'll see how the Sensor rides in the specification that originally sold me on it.

When the Sensor first arrived I commented on the apparent similarity, at least in intended purpose, to the Giant Trance Advanced, my previous longtermer. Any notion that this similarity would extend to include the ride and performance was quickly

dispelled on the first shakedown lap of Cwmcarn's Twrch trail. They're very different bikes.

The most noticeable difference was in how the Sensor seems to generate more speed from the terrain. The Giant had a tendency to quash speed and flow on many trails, and very often felt sluggish. Up the hills and down the other side, the GT feels quicker — and this feeling is backed up against the Strava stopwatch — readily turning my enthusiasm into gratifying and PB-busting speed.

The PathLink suspension has a unique feel, making the GT pert and firm. It's a very efficient climber with barely any pedal-induced bob. Through rocky and rough trails at speed it demonstrates good big-hit capability thanks to the more rearward axle path, but lacks the outright buttery smoothness of the Giant. In many ways it seems to glide over the bumps a bit more, compared to the Giant, which simply tried to smother everything in its path.

So the first few rides have left me impressed, even with the 130mm fork. Now it's time to see if the 150mm-travel upgrade makes it even better.

WHY IT'S HERE
Carbon trail bike
with a unique
suspension system
at a great
price

SPECIFICATION

Frame FOC Ultra Carbon, 130mm travel
Shock Fox Float CTD Performance
Fork RockShox Revelation RL 27.5 Solo Air, 130mm travel
Wheels All Terra sealed hubs, WTB STi23 UST rims, Continental Mountain King/X-King 2.4in tyres
Drivetrain Shimano SLX 38/24t chainset, shifters and f-mech, XT Shadow Plus Direct r-mech
Brakes Shimano SLX 180mm
Components RaceFace Ride 740mm bar and 70mm stem, WTB Silverado saddle, KS LEV Integra seatpost
Sizes S, M, L, XL
Weight 13.2kg (29.1lb)



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2015 Season

Wiltshire Wildcat

Salisbury Racecourse, Wiltshire
Saturday 14th March

Surrey Hills Cyclone

Dorking, Surrey
Sunday 29th March

Dartmoor Demon

Exeter Racecourse, Devon
Saturday 2nd May

South Downs Spring

Plumpton Racecourse, Sussex
Sunday 17th May

The Arrow

Market Rasen Racecourse, Lincolnshire
Sunday 31st May

Ripon Revolution

Ripon Racecourse, Yorkshire
Sunday 28th June

Suffolk Spinner NEW

Ipswich, Suffolk
Sunday 19th July

Malvern Mad Hatter

Three Counties Showground, Worcestershire
Sunday 23rd August

Welsh Raider

Ludlow Racecourse, Shropshire
Saturday 3rd October

Box Hill Original

Dorking, Surrey
Sunday 11th October

FULL ROUTE DETAILS
& SIGN UP AT
BOOKMYRIDE.CO.UK





JAMIE'S LAPIERRE ZESTY TR 329

£1,749.99 / 29in / hotlines-uk.com

SPECIFICATION

Frame Alloy Supreme 6 OST+, 120mm travel
Shock Fox Float CTD Evolution
Fork RockShox Recon Gold Solo Air, 120mm travel
Wheels Formula hubs, Mavic EN321 rims, Schwalbe Nobby Nic 2 Performance 2.25in tyres
Drivetrain SRAM S1000 36/22t chainset, SRAM X7 f-mech, Shimano XT r-mech, Shimano Deore shifters
Brakes Shimano Deore
Components Easton stem and seatpost, FUNN Nico Vouilloz 720mm bar, Lapierre saddle
Sizes S, M, L, XL
Weight 14.3kg (31.5lb)

GEOMETRY

Size tested XL
Head angle 68.1°
Seat angle 70.9°
BB height 336mm
Chainstay 442mm
Front centre 753mm
Wheelbase 1,195mm
Down tube 725mm
Top tube 645mm
Reach 467mm



THE RIDER

JAMIE DARLOW

Position Buzz editor

Mostly rides

Surrey Hills

Height 6ft 1in

Weight 75kg

THE BIKE

■ 120mm-travel 29er with an XC slant

■ Fox Float CTD shock mated to RockShox Recon fork

■ Budget, but decent-performing components

■ No dropper post or quick-release seat collar

MONTH 4: Dropped chains, missed landings and steel drums. It's been an entertaining month for JD...

I'm in the air on the Zesty and I don't have enough speed. Not enough by about half a wheel. And on a 29er that's a lot of wheel. I'm going to case the landing, unless I can claw the back of the bike up a little and nose the Zesty in a touch more to clear the jump...

I'd like to tell you how I skilfully coaxed the Zesty down smoothly, but I actually tagged the landing and made the spokes in the rear wheel go all wobbly. It wasn't a hard hit, but a new jump line has emerged in our local woods and where there are jumps there are always broken bikes. And bodies.

The spokes tightened up nicely though, and the wheel is still true, but I'm not a huge fan of the Zesty's wheels; the bearings feel very rough. I've also tagged plenty of other wheels on those same jumps — last month I walloped a Saracen Kili Flyer and a Trek Remedy 29 on them — without a ding or a wobble. You've probably worked out by now I'm no dirt jumper.

I've also been amazed at just how much fun the Zesty is on jumps; it feels really

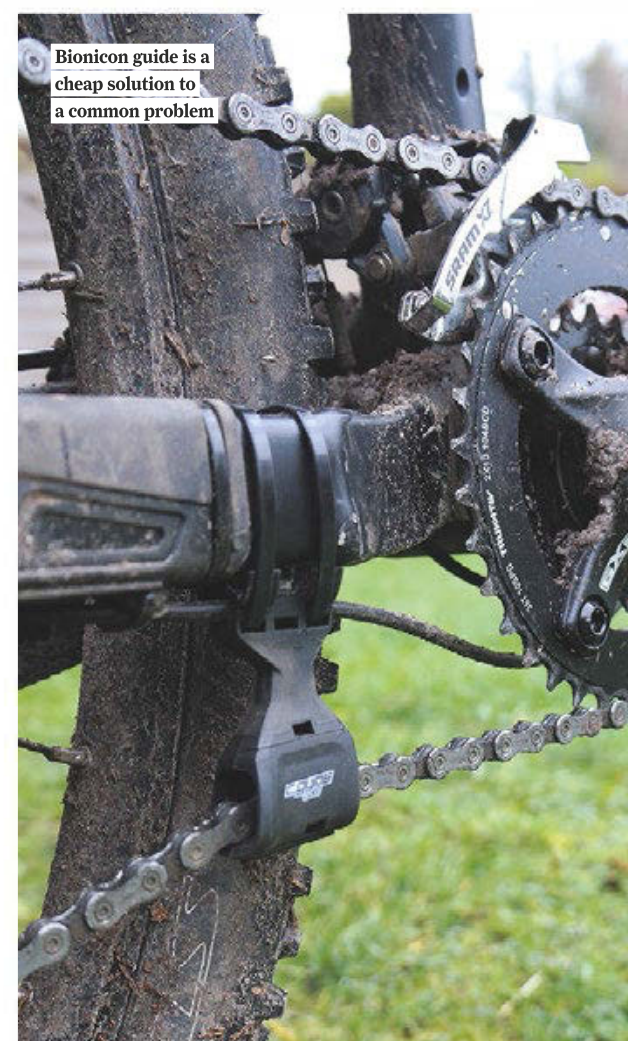
sprightly and ready to get airborne. In the car park it feels like an oil tanker, like it could never excite its pilot. But get it up to speed and it's a brilliant bike, well balanced and full of fun.

Last month I rode the new trail at Cwmcarn to compare it with my old Whyte T129 longtermer from last year. It was night and day. One run on the Whyte and I was ready to quit thanks to the battering it dished out. One run on the Zesty and I was ready for another loop.

Something's pissing me off about the Zesty though. The chain dances a merry jig on the chainstay, making the bike sound like a steel drum. Sometimes it drops the chain too. The bike comes with a top-end XT rear mech but I'd sooner Lapierre had specced the Shadow Plus clutch version, even if that did mean dropping down a level to SLX.

To remedy the problem I've fitted a Bionicon c.guide eco (£23.99, bionicon.com) to the chainstay to add some tension to the chain. Hopefully it's the neat, cheap solution it appears to be. I'll keep you posted.

WHY IT'S HERE
 To find out if the Zesty works best in 29er format



Bionicon guide is a cheap solution to a common problem

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THE
FINAL
VERDICT

BEN'S CANYON SPECTRAL AL 6.9

£1,699 / 29in / canyon.com



THE RIDER

BEN SMITH

Position Art editor

Mostly rides Surrey Hills

Height 5ft 9in

Weight 76kg

THE BIKE

■ 130mm-travel 29er with a trail-ready set-up

■ Fox 32 Float CTD fork and matching rear shock

■ Reverb Stealth, short stem and wide bar as standard

■ Two colour options and four sizes

MONTH 6: Ben reflects on his first foray into the world of big wheels

What attracted you to the Canyon?

Despite grabbing a few rides on 29ers over the years, I'd never really got to grips with big-wheelers. But with its 130mm of travel, decent geometry, and a killer spec for the price, the Spectral looked like a great way of getting acquainted.

Did you change anything straight away?

The spec was superb, and even came with a 740mm-wide bar and short-ish 60mm stem. That said, I had opted for a size large frame and the stock cockpit felt a touch stretched. A 20mm shorter stem and 40mm wider bar sharpened up the handling and improved the fit at the same time. The Ergon grips — with their fat, intrusive clamps — came off almost immediately, replaced instead with regular lock-ons.

Was the bike easy to set up?

Yes and no. Being a direct sales bike, the Spectral came packed neatly in a box and needed assembling — all tools and instructions were supplied,

though, which made it a doddle. The fork was set up with minimal fuss; just set the correct amount of sag and go. The Fox CTD shock, however, seemed to blow through its travel, even when it was run super-firm. So much so that I rode everywhere in Trail mode just to get some extra mid-stroke support and limit the bottoming. Fitting the largest available volume-reducer to the air-can made a massive improvement with noticeably more support and far fewer harsh bottom-outs.

How did it ride?

For a bike that costs less than £1,700, the quality of the ride was very good. The shape and geometry is pretty close to that of an **mbr** favourite, the Specialized Stumpjumper Evo 29er, so it handled well with all the confidence and traction you'd expect from those big wheels. Sure, the Fox fork is the most basic model, but its performance was more than up to the job, and once we'd tweaked the air volume of the



Spongy Avid brakes
the only complaint

shock, the rear suspension was up to speed.

My previous longtermers was a 650b Orange Five RS, and the switch to 29in wheels took longer than expected — almost a month. Once I'd adjusted to the slightly different steering characteristics of the bigger wheels, I was more than happy razzing around the woods, the extra stability they afforded somewhat offsetting the fact that I'd taken a step back in travel.

Did anything break or wear out?

Overall reliability was impressive, the only real issue being the Avid Elixir brakes doing

WHY IT'S HERE
It's my first go
at living with
a 29er



Big wheels, big attitude: Ben gets down with the Canyon



HIGHS

- Great geometry and killer specification made for a fast, capable ride.
- Confident on anything from groomed trail centre trails to gnarly Lake District rock gardens.
- Cheap, easy fix to the rear shock added much needed mid-stroke support, sorting the bike's only issue.



LOWS

- That the bike had such a suspension issue to begin with.
- Avid Elixir brakes were unreliable yet again.
- For just £1,699, it would be harsh to complain any more!



Fast-rolling Contis were swapped for grippier Maxxis mud tyres

SPECIFICATION

Frame Aluminium, 130mm travel
Shock Fox Float CTD Performance BV
Fork Fox 32 Float CTD Evolution, 130mm travel
Wheels Mavic Cross-Ride 29, Continental Mountain King/X-King 2.4in tyres
Drivetrain Race Face Evolve 36/22t chainset, Shimano XT Shadow Plus r-mech, SLX f-mech and shifters
Brakes Avid Elixir 5
Components Crank Brothers Iridium bar, stem and saddle, RockShox Reverb Stealth dropper post
Sizes S, M, L, XL
Weight 13.7kg (30.2lb)

GEOMETRY

Size tested L
Head angle 67.9°
Seat angle 67.4°
BB height 338mm
Chainstay 445mm
Front centre 718mm
Wheelbase 1,163mm
Down tube 706mm
Top tube 608mm
Reach 440mm

what Avid Elixir brakes do — going spongy all too soon. New pads and a bleed restored their performance, but it was frustrating to be getting the syringes out after just three months of use.

If you could change one thing about this longtermer what would it be?

Much as the Avid Elixir brakes made my blood boil, the real limiting factor on the Canyon is the rear shock tune. Out of the box the ride is certainly comfortable, but once I started hitting rougher trails at speed, the bike wasn't as stable or as capable as its numbers initially suggested.

Would you buy this bike?

That's a tricky one, but the straight answer is no. Would I recommend it to a friend looking for their first full-suspension bike? In a heartbeat. That's because Canyon has managed to tick every box on the spec sheet with well-chosen, trail-ready parts at an incredible price.

In fact, this 2014 model is still available on Canyon's website for just £1,529.02 in limited numbers/sizes, making it even more of a steal.



An air-volume tweak sorted the shock



1x cranksets

Whether it's a replacement or an enhancement, riders are looking to single-ring cranksets as the way forward. We put three aluminium and three carbon sets to the test

Words: Paul Burwell, Alan Muldoon Photos: Roo Fowler, Mike Prior

There are two reasons to buy a new crankset — it's either worn out or you're looking to upgrade to something better. To cover both requirements we've included two types in this test: entry-level aluminium cranks and top-end carbon. Either way, many riders right now are thinking about converting their bike to a single ring, and all six cranks on test here are configured for 1x use. Some are single-ring specific and only available in this format, but all are ready for use in this way. This explains why there is no Shimano crank in this group test. It makes some of the stiffest, most affordable aluminium cranksets on the market, but currently doesn't offer any

with a single ring. There's nothing stopping you converting a Shimano crank to 1x, but you'll have to use someone else's chainring to do so.

Why all the fuss over 1x in the first place? Losing gears may seem like a backwards step, but upgrading to a 1x crankset allows you to eliminate the front derailleur and all the associated hardware and hassles. A narrow/wide chainring can put an end to chain loss, too. And it'll save a ton of weight — the front mech, shifter and cable can add up to 450g (nearly a pound).

There are some secondary benefits too — more clearance round the bottom bracket area, less maintenance as you have one less cable to look

after and it declutters the handlebar. Best of all, 1x works with nine, 10 or 11-speed, so you can simply fit one of the cranks in this test and get out riding.

Early 1x cranksets were expensive, but over the past year the technology has filtered down to cheaper products. These cranksets are yet to feature heavily on entry-level bikes because they go hand-in-hand with wide-range 11-speed cassettes, and that's where the money is, but affordable aluminium 1x cranksets are readily available aftermarket. The three high-end carbon cranks can all run multiple rings if you prefer, but to keep the process consistent we ran them 1x throughout the test.

Know your crankset

CRANK LENGTH

The traditional crank length on a mountain bike is 175mm but 165, 170, and 180mm cranks are also sometimes available. Shorter cranks offer better pedal clearance and work best for riders with short legs. Longer cranks offer more leverage and are good for riders with longer legs.

TOOTH PROFILE

The alternating thick and thin teeth on a narrow/wide chainring interlock with the male and female links on the chain to provide more secure engagement and lessen the risk of chain loss. You can use any single ring with nine, 10 or 11-speed gearing and a Shimano or a SRAM drivetrain.

BCD

Aka the bolt circle diameter. This is the diameter of a circle drawn through the bolts holding the chainring onto the spider. The common size for a triple crankset is 104mm, but there is different diameter for double cranksets and even some custom BCDs, such as that used for SRAM's XX1 cranks.

BOTTOM BRACKET

Not all cranks come with a BB, so you'll need to budget for that. And some cranks are offered with different diameter spindles, so it's important to get the right size for your bike. If your bike has a standard threaded BB you'll need a crank with a 24mm diameter axle. If it's oversized you'll need a BB30 crank with a 30mm spindle.



FORGED ARMS

Forging produces the stiffest and strongest aluminium because it aligns the grain structure of the material. Hollow forging is even better, but it's a more complex technique and is therefore notably more expensive.



DIRECT-MOUNT CHAINRING

The standard method of attaching a chainring is to mount it to a spider, which is either part of the crank or bolted on. Direct-mount means eliminating the spider and bolting the ring directly to the crank arm, saving around 80g. The downside is once the ring wears out the whole thing needs replacing. And direct-mount chainrings do cost more.



PROTECTIVE TAPE

If you've spent £600 on a carbon crank the last thing you want is for it to look tatty after two or three rides. Most carbon cranks come with clear tape on the arms to reduce wear and tear from foot rub. It doesn't always look pretty but it can be replaced once it wears off.

CRANK BOOTS

These little covers protect the most fragile part of the arm from impact damage — essential on carbon cranks. They're also available separately (from Race Face, SRAM and Zefal) for under a tenner.



USED AND ABUSED

How we tested the cranks

We split this test into two equal parts, with one **mb**r tester responsible for testing all three aluminium cranks and another putting the trio of carbon cranks through the grinder.

When testing we looked at several key factors — the first being how easy the crank and BB was to install. We then conducted back-to-back testing to assess crank arm stiffness, as this directly

affects performance. More flex means that less energy is being transmitted to the rear wheel, which means more effort is required for the same output. The final piece of the jigsaw is

long-term durability — wear on the rings, crank arms and, most important of all, the bearings in the BB. It was especially helpful that this test was conducted throughout the winter months.

Aluminium cranks



RACE FACE RIDE

£119.99

SPECIFICATION • Weight: cranks 702g, BB 106g, system 808g • Ring sizes: 32 and 34t • BCD: 104mm • Crank lengths: 170 and 175mm • Spindle: steel • BB: X-type, BB92/PF30/BB30 conversion also available • Colour: black • Contact: silverfish-uk.com

The Race Face Ride crankset starts life as a triple chainset, but to make it 1x ready Race Face bolts on one of its narrow/wide chainrings and installs blanking plates on the outside tabs. These are a nice touch and look a lot neater than having just plain chainring bolts.

Like most modern alloy cranks, the Ride's arms are forged for strength and scalloped at the back to reduce weight. The arms join a stiff cro-mo steel spindle but unfortunately you'll need an old-school crank extractor to remove them as they lack the self-extracting fixing bolt found on the better Race Face models.

The Race Face narrow/wide chainring is machined from 4mm thick aluminium and has an I-beam profile for stiffness. It's not the most durable though and does wear quickly in wet and gritty UK conditions.

The ring fixes to the crank via a standard 104BCD bolt pattern, which allows you to use another brand if desired. But like all cranks running this bolt pattern you're limited in terms of ring size and won't be able to run anything smaller than an offset 30t.

A BB is included. It has lightweight aluminium cups and super-smooth cartridge bearings, which come factory-filled with Phil Wood waterproof grease and triple wiper seals to stop water ingress. The threads on the cups are a tight fit into the frame but the bearings have turned out to be the most durable of the three tested, and we've done some pretty wet rides on this unit.

In terms of stiffness the Ride is a tad more flexible than the SRAM X1 but you'd have to be big, or ride hard, to notice the difference. It does however have a better surface finish so will look better for longer,

and in our less than delightful climate that's surely a major plus point.

The narrow/wide chainring looked worn after one wet ride but the retention performance has remained consistently good throughout testing.

The reason the Ride is our test winner is simple — it's £40-£50 cheaper than the other cranks on test. If you want an affordable way onto the 1x ladder, there's nothing better for the money.



You'll need a crank extractor to remove the arms



Aluminium BB contains durable cartridge bearings

AEROZINE X-ONE A1

£169.99

SPECIFICATION • Weight: cranks 564g, BB 92g, system 656g • Ring sizes: 28, 30, 32, 34, 36 and 38t • BCD: direct-mount • Crank lengths: 170, 172.5 and 175mm • Spindle: steel • BB: Shimano • Colour: black, red • Contact: nrg4.co.uk

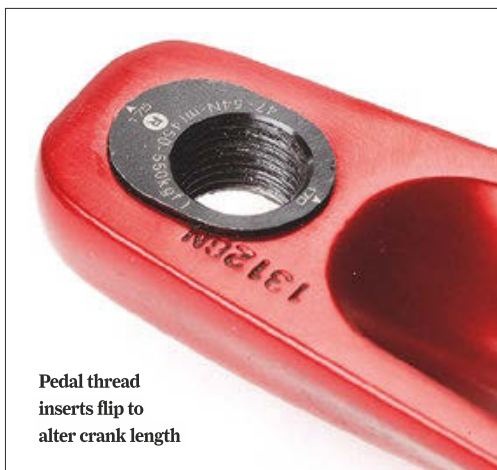
Like the SRAM X1 this is a dedicated 1x crankset; the difference is it comes with a direct-mount chainring as standard. This saves around 80g over a crank with a separate spider and also allows you run rings all the way down to 26t, handy if you're mating this to a 10-speed drivetrain and don't want to be over-gear.

The crank arms are forged aluminium and come with a set of ALS (Adjustable Length System) inserts that plug the holes in the end of the arms. By simply flipping them round you can reduce the arm length from 175 to 170mm. There are a couple of

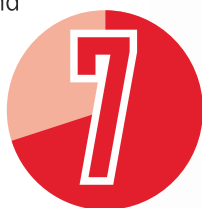
reasons for this. Shorter cranks offer extra ground clearance, which is why you see them on DH bikes — but obviously this isn't the case here because the actual arms are the same length. You also see short cranks on small size bikes, the thinking being riders with shorter legs have less leverage and find them easier to get turning. Either way, the in-built adjustability seems a little unnecessary especially since fitting the pedals is a lot more involved and requires you to hold the insert, washer, pedal and 8mm Allen key, all at the same time.

With a self-extracting bolt pre-installed, fitting the cranks was straightforward and removing the ring was equally easy. The single spider ring bolts onto the back of the crank using the same interface used on SRAM cranks. It has a narrow/wide tooth profile and worked flawlessly during testing.

The X-One is super-light, comes with a wide range of ring sizes and a quality bottom bracket but we marked it down because it's expensive and flexy, with crank-arm twist apparent when sprinting and climbing.



Pedal thread inserts flip to alter crank length



SRAM X1 1000

£149.99 (NO BB)

SPECIFICATION • Weight: cranks 745g, BB 110g, system 855g • Ring sizes: 30, 32, 34, 36 and 38t • BCD: 104mm • Crank lengths: 175mm • Spindle: steel • BB: GXP • Colour: black, red • Contact: fisheroutdoor.co.uk

This crank is integral to SRAM's budget 1x11 groupset but there are actually three X1 cranks in the range — 1000, 1200 and 1400. The 1000 is the cheapest and as such has solid, rather than hollow forged arms and is only offered in a single 175mm arm length. It may look like it splits the Race Face and Aerozine cranksets in terms of cost but you'll need to account for the fact that the price above doesn't include a GXP bottom bracket. That'll set you back an extra £28, and you will need a GXP-compatible one because the SRAM crank and BB fit together in a slightly different way.

The X-SYNC chainring uses SRAM's distinctive narrow/wide tooth profile to improve chain retention and is available in a range of sizes from 30 to 38t but again to reduce costs you can only buy the 1000 with a 32t; you'll have to pay extra for a different size. The other restriction with this crank is the smallest ring you can fit is a 30t due to the 104BCD.

The 1000 is not as stiff as the hollow 1400 X1 crankset but it's the stiffest here. There's some wear on the arms and chainring but we've not dropped a chain during the entire test. Unfortunately the same can't be said of the GXP bottom bracket we ran it with. After only a couple of months' riding the bearings felt rough and worn and the bottom bracket even seized up solid several times.

The 1000 crankset is stiff and strong but like the XX1 tested elsewhere, it's not as cheap as it first appears because you will need to buy a bottom bracket to go with it. We'd also definitely recommend upgrading from the standard GXP, especially if you do a lot of winter riding.



104BCD limits ring sizes



Carbon cranks

TEST
WINNER!

CARBON CRANKS

RACE FACE NEXT SL

£429 (no BB)

SPECIFICATION • Weight: cranks 448g, BB 116g, system 564g • Ring sizes: 28, 30, 32, 34t
• BCD: Cinch direct-mount (double and triple options) • Crank lengths: 170 and 175mm
• Spindle: alloy 30mm • BB: traditional, BB92, PF30, 100mm BSA (sold separately £39.95)
• Colour: carbon • Contact: silverfish-uk.com

There are three key ways to produce a lightweight carbon chainset without compromising stiffness or strength. The first is to eliminate the chainring bolts and produce a dedicated direct-mount single ring. Next, at least in terms of simplicity, is to switch from a standard 24mm steel spindle to 30mm aluminium. The biggest gains in stiffness, however, are achieved by making the crank arms hollow.

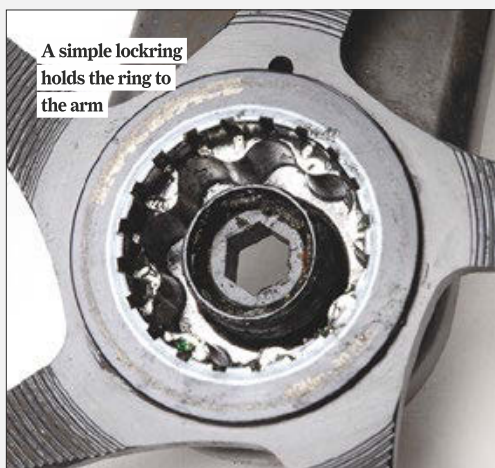
Race Face uses all three of these processes on the Next SL chainset, where carbon maximises the weight savings while seriously boosting its bling factor. It's one sexy bit of kit. It's also seriously light. Ignoring the BB, the Next SL is by far the lightest crank in test, lending credence to its claim of being the lightest production carbon chainset on the planet.

It's actually the BB that's of most interest, as it brings the Next SL chainset to a much wider audience. Rather than make two cranks, like SRAM XX1, to accommodate different frame standards, Race Face has come up with a more elegant solution and produces four dedicated BBs. Each uses custom bearings, but they allow Race Face to squeeze the lightweight 30mm spindle into any frame. Our only concern is that the super-slender internal bearings needed for the BB92 standard simply won't last.

Race Face's modular Cinch design extends to the spindle lengths, which means you could change the axle to fit your fat bike. And, because you can remove the chainring with nothing more than an old Shimano BB tool, swapping from a direct-mount single ring, to a double, or even a triple ring set-up with spider is, you guessed it...a cinch.

So the new Next SL chainset is super-light, incredibly stiff and you can have

pretty much every combination of BB and chainring set-up imaginable. It's not immune to damage, though. And as good as the plastic boots are at preventing scratches, a seriously hard pedal strike on a rock actually loosened the alloy pedal insert in the right-hand carbon arm, rendering it useless. We're convinced that same impact would have stripped the threads out of an alloy chainset too, or at the very least bent the crank arm. So we won't be deducting points for reckless riding.



SPECIALIZED S-WORKS

£500 (no chainring)

SPECIFICATION • Weight: cranks 492g (32t ring), BB 76g, system 568g • Ring sizes: 32,34,36,38t (not supplied) • BCD: 104mm • Crank lengths: 170 and 175mm • Spindle: alloy BB30 • BB: BB30/PF30 (included) • Colour: carbon • Contact: specialized.com

If you take a closer look at Specialized's S-Works suspension bikes you'll see that they share more than just FSR suspension and jaw-dropping price tags. From the lightweight XC-race Epic all the way up to the 160mm gravity-fuelled Enduro, they all use the same fourth-generation S-Works carbon chainset.

Specialized uses the FACT carbon construction process, similar to that of its frames, to produce the hollow arms, and this crank is every bit as stout as the Next SL with very direct power delivery. The difference is that Specialized retains an

integrated spider, with the option to run a double ring set-up.

Having this feature seems a bit unnecessary since all the Specialized bikes that come with this chainset run single rings — but it does allow you to bolt twin or single rings straight onto the arms. The only real downside of this set-up is that the 104 BCD means the smallest single ring you can use is 32t, unless you get an offset 30t ring, and there's no facility to fit a lighter direct-mount chainring.

We really like the BB design on the S-Works chainset as the oversized cartridge bearings press into soft plastic cups, which means you shouldn't have to bury the entire BB when the bearings die. It's also 38g lighter than the equivalent Race Face BB, giving the Specialized S-Works chainset a system weight that's only 4g heavier than the Next SL. So Race Face wins by the breadth of a carbon strand, but the lightest compete chainset would actually be a combination of both!



Two-ring compatibility is built in



SRAM XX1

£295 (no chainring or BB)

SPECIFICATION • Weight: cranks 554g (with chainring), BB 90g, system 644g • Ring sizes: 28,30,32,34,36,38-38t (sold separately £70-£100) • BCD: 76mm • Crank lengths: 170 and 175mm • Spindle: steel GXP and alloy BB30 • BB: X-type, BB92/PF30/BB30 (sold separately £37) • Colour: Carbon • Contact: fisheroutdoor.co.uk

Hi-tech as SRAM's 1x11 drive train is, the XX1 carbon chainset isn't as stiff as the other two in test. We suspect this is because the carbon arms aren't hollow. We've not got a fancy test lab at **mbr** to prove it, but switching between the cranks was enough to highlight the reduction in stiffness, and it's 106g heavier than the Next SL.

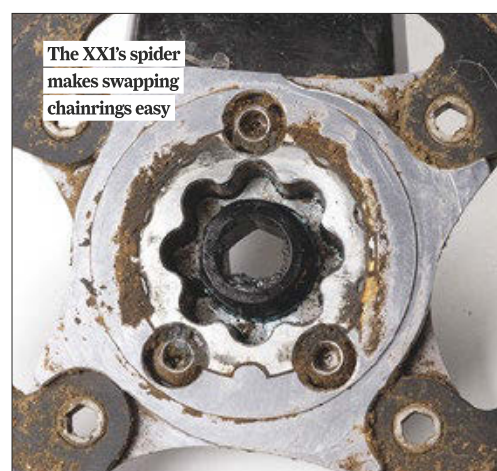
SRAM went to great lengths designing the compact 76mm BCD spider to ensure a wide selection of chainring sizes, and that the chainrings could easily be swapped without having to remove the chainset. This is a welcome feature for pro riders

fine-tuning their gearing, but most trail riders will only change the chainring when it's worn out.

So instead of buying an XX1 chainring (the crank doesn't come with one) you could save up to 80g at no extra cost by getting a second party direct-mount ring and ditching the XX1 spider. In fact, by the time you read this, XX1, X01 and X1 chainsets will be available with a new SRAM X-Sync direct-mount ring.

One thing that separates XX1 from most other cranks is that it's available in two widths, or Q-factors. This means you can more closely match crank spacing to pelvis width for better pedalling efficiency. Again, it's an XC thing that most trail riders won't give a hoot about.

If the XX1 chainset comes on your new bike, you won't be rushing to upgrade it in a hurry. That said, if you want a fancy carbon crank and your budget won't stretch to the Race Face Next SL or Specialized S-Works, we'd recommend the cheaper second-tier X01, with its new direct-mount ring, over the XX1 version.



The XX1's spider makes swapping chainrings easy



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Combed 100% organic cotton, slim fitting



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MENS BICYCLE T-SHIRT: INDIGO

Combed 100% organic cotton, slim fitting



100% combed cotton



£26

ROUTE CYCLING RANGE

WOMENS REFLECTIVE WHEEL T-SHIRT

This garment uses light-reflective ink, this bamboo cotton t-shirt will help you be seen in low light. Both the front & rear are printed using silver light reflective ink. Combined with 30% organic cotton and 70% bamboo, bamboo fabric is super soft and also double ups as an ideal base layer for colder weather. Naturally odour resistant.

A natural performance fabric



£30

ROUTE CYCLING RANGE

WOMENS BICYCLE T-SHIRT: LT BLUE

Combed 100% organic cotton, slim fitting



100% combed cotton



£26

ROUTE CYCLING RANGE

WOMENS CRASH T-SHIRT: LT BLUE

Combed 100% organic cotton, slim fitting



100% combed cotton



£26

ROUTE CYCLING RANGE

Men's sizing: Small 35-37 inch chest, Medium 38-40 inch chest, Large 41-43 inch chest. All slim fitting. Women's sizing: Small - Size 10, Medium - Size 12, Large - Size 14, XL - Size 16 (UK Ladies Dress Size)

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Verdict

A crankset, especially one with a single ring, is one of the few components on a bike that you can fit without having to worry about compatibility. All of the cranksets in this test will function perfectly well with nine, 10 or 11-speed drivetrains from either Shimano or SRAM.

Not all of them are available with a 30mm spindle to fit an oversized BB30 bottom bracket shell, but it seems that needing to have different cranks to fit the two BB sizes may be a thing of the past. By using custom bearing cups, Race Face is able to fit the Next SL 30mm spindle into any frame — regular or BB30. The only thing you need to buy is a £40 bottom bracket. This solution will actually benefit all the crank manufacturers because there's nothing stopping you from using the Specialized or SRAM cranksets with the Race

Face BB. It's such a good idea it should become an industry standard.

In the top half of our crank test, it was a close-run thing between three excellent carbon cranks. The SRAM XX1 was relegated to the bottom step of our podium only because it was the heaviest, the most flexible and it's not as good value as the price suggests because you'll need to buy a chainring and a bottom bracket. You'll have to buy a chainring for the S-Works too, but at least it's as stiff as the Next SL and nearly as light.

A carbon crank is an expensive upgrade, so being able to take it with you, should you upgrade your frame, is a great idea. Race Face lets you do exactly that with Next SL. Light, stiff and versatile, it's easily deserving of top marks.

The Race Face is transferable, should you upgrade, and it's light, stiff and versatile. Top marks

For a third of the price of the carbon models, there are also some absolutely cracking aluminium cranksets. By using the same three-bolt spider interface as SRAM, the Aerozine X-One A1 can be fitted with any ring combination, including direct-mount. It's lightweight but the arms are a bit flexy and we're not sold on the length-adjusting ALS pedal inserts.

SRAM's X1 chainset is as stiff as the Race Face Ride, but it weighs more. And when you factor in the extra cost of a bottom bracket, it also costs more.

The chainring on the Race Face Ride isn't the hardest-wearing, and you'll need an extractor to remove the crank, but it's pretty obvious why it's the best budget crank. Look what you get for your money: the narrow wide chainring is £44.99, X-type BB is £39.99; take that away from the £120 and you're effectively getting a set of stiff-forged cranks for £40!



TEST
WINNER!
ALUMINIUM
CRANKS

TEST
WINNER!
CARBON CRANKS

	Price	Weight (system)	Lengths	Spindle size	Ring sizes	Contact	Rating
ALUMINIUM CRANKS							
Aerozine X-One A1	£169.99	656g	170/172.5/175mm	24mm	28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38T	nrg4.co.uk	7
Race Face Ride	£119.99	808g	170/175mm	24mm	32, 34T	silverfish-uk.com	9
SRAM X1 1000	£149.99 (No BB)	855g	175mm	24mm	30, 32, 34, 36, 38T	fisheroutdoor.co.uk	8
CARBON CRANKS							
Race Face Next SL	£429 (no BB)	564g	170/175mm	30mm	28, 30, 32, 34T	silverfish-uk.com	10
Specialized S-Works	£500 (no chainring)	568g	170/175mm	30mm	32, 34, 36, 38T	specialized.com	9
SRAM XX1	£295 (no chainring/BB)	644g	170/175mm	24/30mm	28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38T	fisheroutdoor.co.uk	8



29er trail slayers

Our 2014 Bike of the Year — the Stumpy Evo — goes up against two well-dressed pretenders, all at £2.5k

Words: Paul Burwell Photos: Dean Smith



CANYON SPECTRAL AL 9.9

£2,549



**CUBE STEREO 140 HPC
RACE 29**

£2,499



**SPECIALIZED
STUMPJUMPER FSR
COMP EVO 29**

£2,500



All types of terrain were ridden in our quest to find the best

The question we get asked the most at **mbr** is what trail bike should I buy? Should it be a 29er or 650b? How much travel do I need? What brand should I get? Unfortunately, there's no easy answer, because having a certain wheel size, travel,

geometry or spec, is no guarantee of anything. Put simply, there isn't one single attribute that makes the perfect trail bike.

However, if you come at this problem from a different angle, there is one prerequisite for every great trail bike: the ability to be ridden as fast as your limits — not its — will allow. It should instill confidence, which, in turn, lets you push harder on every ride.

Finding this perfect trail bike is a full-time job at **mbr**. We're constantly testing and reviewing bikes trying to work out if this bike is The One. This month we're testing three 29ers, which isn't because they *necessarily* make better trail bikes — but the fact is, when we're riding anything less than 160mm of travel off-duty, we always reach for the big-wheelers. The good ones cover ground remarkably efficiently, yet they remain thoroughly engaging on the fun stuff.

To keep this test fair, the bikes are all priced at around £2.5k. Equality of price used to indicate similar levels of

specification. In the days of direct sales, however, this simply isn't the case. The Canyon Spectral AL 9.9 is £50 more expensive than its rivals, but without a dealer margin to factor into the price tag, Canyon is able to offer a much better build for the money. It's the sort of parts package you'd expect to find on a £3,500 bike, never mind one costing £1,000 less.

The Cube Stereo HPC Race is equally well attired and even gets a carbon front end — a feat that is even more impressive given that it can actually be bought through old-fashioned bricks and mortar stores.

The third and final bike in the test is the Specialized Stumpy Evo. It destroyed the competition in the equivalent test last year, and went on to win our 2014 Bike of the Year as well. Next to the Canyon and Cube, however, the components look a little cheap.

Yes, the specification is important to overall performance and value, but it is only part of the picture. The same is true of the amount of travel — more isn't necessarily better. You also can't isolate one aspect of the geometry and say this is responsible for why this bike is more fun to ride. In fact, the only constants here, other than the price and wheel size, are the tyres, which we fit ourselves.

The point is, trail bikes come in lots of shapes and (wheel) sizes, so variations in performance can be due to a combination of factors, including travel, geometry, sizing, suspension and even price. More often than not, the bikes with the best ride and handling are greater than the sum of their parts... let's see if that's the case this time round.

SPECIAL THANKS

To BikePark Wales for the uplift. We promise to bring better weather next time. Bikeparkwales.com



All in a day's work: being this thorough is a tough job...

WHERE AND HOW

Tale of the test

A trail bike should be capable of a bit of everything, from riding loamy singletrack to hammering around a trail centre, and maybe even the odd uplift day thrown in for good measure. To give them a good workout, we spent six weeks bombing round the Surrey Hills on the three test bikes. It's a mix of fresh loam, slippery roots and sandstone hardpack.

During the test, the trails went from bone-dry to muddy clag-fest, which was good news for our test, because we could check on clearances and performance in the mud, even if it was bad news for keeping our kit clean.

We then spent a couple of days in South Wales, topped off with a climb-free day shuttling at Bike Park Wales. We settled on a lap that included Wibbly Wobbly and Rim Dinger — both tough tracks with loads of rocks, braking bumps and exposed roots. It was an extreme test for the suspension and geometry, but great for rooting out the best all-rounder.

Put simply, there isn't one single attribute that makes the perfect trail bike

CONTROL TYRES

Fitting standard rubber is the only way to provide consistency in handling and when measuring and weighing the bikes. It also makes sense to use a tyre that works in the conditions of the test. We specced a softer-compound 3C Maxxis Minion DHF in 29x2.3in on the front and the same size on the rear, but in a quicker-rolling compound. Prices start at £29.99. maxxis.co.uk





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BIKE TEST

Canyon fits front and rear specific Continental 2.4in tyres with a Protection casing

The frame is covered under a three-year crash replacement policy; break it and you can buy a new one at a reduced price

A custom 130mm RockShox Pike perfectly matches the rear wheel travel

No pedals, but a tool, shock pump and frame protection are included in the box

CANYON SPECTRAL AL 9.9

£2,549

SPECIFICATION

Frame aluminium, 130mm travel
Shock Cane Creek DBinline
Fork RockShox Pike RCT3, 130mm travel
Wheels DT Swiss XM1501 Spline wheelset, Continental Mountain King II/X-King 29x2.4in tyres
Drivetrain SRAM XO chainset, f-mech, r-mech and shifters
Brakes SRAM Guide RS brakes 180mm
Components Canyon V-12 stem 70mm, Canyon H13 flat bar, RockShox Reverb Stealth dropper post
Sizes S, M, L, XL
Weight 14.34kg (31.61lb)
Contact canyon.com

GEOMETRY

Size tested L
Head angle 68.1°
Seat angle 69.3°
BB height 340mm
Chainstay 450mm
Front centre 730mm
Wheelbase 1,180mm
Down tube 715mm
Top tube 619mm
Reach 439mm

Canyon is a direct-sales brand, which means you buy the bike from a website rather than walking into a shop. It's based in Germany, the bikes are manufactured in Asia, but all the prices are quoted in sterling and it delivers directly to your door — although that costs an extra £48. By cutting out the middleman and reducing overheads, Canyon can pass significant savings on to its customers.

Hardly surprising then, that the Spectral AL 9.9 is one of the best dressed bikes in this test. The frame is only aluminium — not carbon, like the Cube — but at 14.34kg (31.61lb) it's not a lot heavier and the build quality is exceptional. There are, however, a couple of little things we don't like — there is no QR lever on the 142x12mm rear axle, so you need a tool to remove it. It's also tricky to locate in the dropouts because the alignment isn't spot on, and the Allen key often got wedged in the end of the axle. We also had problems with chain suck and chain derailments. Which is strange, as the Spectral AL 9.9 gets an E168 chain tensioner — similar to the Specialized's Dangler — that's supposed to stop this happening.

SUSPENSION

To control the 130mm of rear travel, the Canyon comes fitted with Cane Creek's new DBinline air shock. It essentially has the same double barrel design, and fully independent damping adjustments, as the regular DBair but without the piggy-back reservoir, allowing it to be squeezed into a wider variety of frame designs.

To make set-up easier, there is a base tune for the Spectral AL 9.9 listed on the Cane Creek website, as well as a

recommended sag setting. Even with these dialed in the Spectral AL 9.9's suspension tended to cycle too easily around the mid-stroke, but unlike the Stumpy Evo it isn't lively and there's not as much grip or pop. It gets particularly animated when climbing, so we were happy to see the Climb Switch on top of the DBinline as it has a really calming effect on the bike. In fact, we used it quite a bit on flatter, technical trails just because it added some much-needed stability.

COMPONENTS

It's great to get a Reverb Stealth seatpost on a £2.5k bike, but the one on the Spectral AL 9.9 only has 100mm drop, rather than the more common 125mm. The upshot being that the saddle smacked us in the chest on steep descents. We also found the 70mm stem a touch long and, while Canyon says you can go shorter, it doesn't offer that option when purchasing the bike. It does, however, let you swap the Ergon SME30 saddle for a women's Vitesse at no extra charge.

Tubeless-ready DT Swiss XM1501 wheels come fitted with fast-rolling Continental tyres. They are 2.4in, though, and will result in a higher bottom bracket than we measured with our Maxxis control tyres fitted.

PERFORMANCE

We spent six weeks testing the Spectral AL 9.9 in the Surrey Hills, and in that time we thought it was competent but uninspiring. The first run at Bike Park Wales, though, had us scratching our heads, because it suddenly felt amazing; railing corners, flying off jumps, even hammering through rock

gardens. We were pushing it so hard it was the only bike we pinch-flatted that day.

It felt so different to our previous experience that we decided to double-check the geometry, and it soon became clear something had changed. The BB was 20mm lower and the head angle was two degrees slacker. How could that be? For some reason the Cane Creek shock had stuck down and we'd lost 10mm from the stroke. It doesn't sound like a big difference but it resulted in massive changes to the geometry and handling. Obviously the shock is covered under warranty, and we have since fitted a replacement, with no further issue. But we were back to square one with the handling.

VERDICT

What's telling about riding the Spectral AL 9.9, with a stuck-down shock and non-standard geometry, is how the bike felt much more stable at speed. Granted, the rear suspension didn't work anything like as well as it did with a fully functioning shock, but the extra stability meant that we weren't always having to compensate for the overly soft rear suspension. It's a similar story on other Canyon Spectrals we've tested, and it just seems to be a peculiarity of the suspension design. It's frustrating to say the least, especially given that the rest of the bike is top-notch.

8

HIGHS

Great fork, top quality frame and lightweight wheels



LOWS

Issues with chain suck and mushy suspension feel



The lack of a rear axle QR lever is annoying



The new DBInline air shock with its calming Climb Switch



The Reverb Stealth seatpost suffers from just a 100mm drop



Stealth-routed RockShox Reverb with 125mm drop is the cherry on top

140mm travel at both ends with neat aluminium hardware on all the pivot points

The DT Swiss wheels on the Stereo 140 HPC Race are the lightest in the test

Carbon SRAM XO crank helps with the weight saving

CUBE STEREO 140 HPC RACE 29

£2,499

SPECIFICATION

Frame Carbon-fibre/aluminium, 140mm travel
Shock Fox Float CTD Performance
Fork RockShox Pike RC, 140mm travel
Wheels DT CSW AM 3.9, Schwalbe Hans Dampf 29x2.35in tyres
Drivetrain SRAM XO carbon chainset, XO f-mech, r-mech and SRAM X9 shifters
Brakes SRAM Guide R 180mm
Components Race Face Evolve 70mm stem, Race Face Ride 740mm bar, RockShox Reverb Stealth post, Selle Italia X1 saddle
Sizes 16, 18, 20, 22in
Weight 13.85kg (30.53lb)
Contact cube.eu/uk

GEOMETRY

Size tested L
Head angle 68°
Seat angle 71.2°
BB drop 335mm
Chainstay 450mm
Front centre 730mm
Wheelbase 1,180mm
Down tube 715mm
Top tube 599mm
Reach 424mm

Visit the Cube website looking for the Stereo 140 HPC Race and you'll be presented with a bewildering array of bikes all bearing very similar names. To be honest, it's confusing, especially since Cube has changed this bike considerably since we first tested it as a longtermer two years ago. Originally it came with a full carbon frame, but Cube has since moved to an aluminium rear end. It has also replaced the Fox 34 fork with a RockShox Pike and fitted a Reverb Stealth dropper post. Somehow it has also managed to drop the price by £300. If you compare the spec to the Stumpy Evo you have to ask, how is that possible? Especially given that Cube is selling this bike through dealers, and not direct like Canyon.

Whatever the answer, getting a carbon front end on a £2.5k bike is a boon. The frame itself features a tapered head tube, square section seat tube for stiffness, carbon armour on the down tube and tidy internal cable routing — although the gear cables do creak a bit where they enter the top tube. With a wide press-fit bottom bracket and huge down tube the Stereo is super-solid, yet remains competitive on the scales.

SUSPENSION

The Pike fork fitted to the Stereo 140 HPC Race is the RC model, which means it lacks the threshold adjuster of the RCT3 on the Canyon. It does get 10mm more travel, though, and, on the rocky trails in Wales, this Pike felt smoother and more controlled than the RCT3 on the Canyon.

Things weren't so straightforward with the rear suspension. The Fox CTD shock is the mid-range Performance series model

and comes fitted with a medium size volume reducer in the air can to increase progression. However, the rear suspension still bottoms too easily and also tends to sit up too quickly after big impacts, which would indicate that the damping isn't 100 per cent either. There also seemed to be quite a bit of friction in the pivots, and while they bedded in slightly with use, the rear end still felt lethargic.

COMPONENTS

The Stereo 140 HPC Race is dripping with expensive clobber. Fortunately the only two things we replaced are the two cheapest items — the bar and stem. Both are heavy, and while the 740mm Race Face riser is of ample width, the 70mm stem felt too long for a 140mm travel 29er.

The SRAM Guide brakes are the cheaper R models, not the RS as on the Canyon Spectral. Still, both get four-piston calipers and tool-free reach adjustment, it's just that the RS gets better quality bearings in the lever pivot. In terms of feel it's hard to tell any difference when new, but you might down the line once the bushings in the Guide Rs start to wear.

PERFORMANCE

With the cockpit tweaked and the suspension set on the firm side, the Stereo 140 HPC Race started to smoulder, but it never really caught alight, even with gravity fuelling the fire. There's a ton of stiffness in the bottom bracket area, and with lightweight wheels and frame it should be a great climber and quick off the mark, but again it's subdued — there's none of the lively, excited feeling you get with the Stumpy Evo.

On paper the geometry is not actually that dissimilar to the Stumpy Evo — the bike has the same bottom bracket height and wheelbase, and it's slacker — but dynamically it feels more upright and too short. It also has the least standover clearance of the three bikes tested. Being a proper 20in frame, it has quite a tall seat tube, so much so that, when the 125mm Reverb is at full extension, riders with shorter legs will struggle to reach the pedals.

To be fair, Cube has increased the reach on the 650b models, making the 18in a viable option, but this tweak has yet to be implemented on its 29ers.

VERDICT

The Stereo 140 HPC Race is stiff, light and way better value than the Stumpy Evo, but in terms of ride quality it just doesn't feel like a hard-hitting 29er trail bike. It has a great fork and a great build, but to really make it shine Cube needs to update the geometry by adding some length to the bike, and tune the suspension so it appeals more to aggressive riders. With those changes the Stereo 140 HPC Race could be an awesome 29er, because it has the best spec of any bike on the shop floor. Even now we still don't know how Cube does it.

8

HIGHS
Absolutely
stunning
specification for
the money



LOWS
The ride quality
doesn't match
the bling
build-kit



Mid-range Fox shock
needs a retune to
suit aggressive riders



XO cranks save weight
but not as much as a
single-ring set-up



RockShox Pike fork
felt smooth and controlled
at BikePark Wales



An in-house Dangler and SRAM Type II rear derailleur help with chain retention

Three-position Command Post is cable-actuated, so needs regular TLC

The Roval Fattie 29 wheels are the heaviest on test, but they get wide rims for extra stiffness and still roll fast

Shimano Deore disc brakes have tool-free reach adjustment, a firm lever feel and tons of power

SPECIALIZED STUMPJUMPER FSR COMP EVO 29

£2,500

SPECIFICATION

Frame M5 aluminium, 135mm travel
Shock Fox Float CTD Evolution with Autosag
Fork RockShox Revelation RC 29, 140mm travel
Wheels Specialized HiLo hubs, Roval Fattie 29 rims, Specialized Butcher/Slaughter 2.3in tyres
Drivetrain SRAM S-1250 chainset, X7 f-mech/shifters, X9 r-mech
Brakes Shimano Deore 203/180mm
Components Specialized Command Post, XC 750mm bar/90mm stem, BG Henge Comp saddle
Sizes S, M, L, XL, XXL
Weight 14.37kg (31.68lb)
Contact specialized.com

GEOMETRY

Size tested L
Head angle 68.3°
Seat angle 69.5°
BB height 335mm
Chainstay 455mm
Front centre 720mm
Wheelbase 1,175mm
Down tube 725mm
Top tube 622mm
Reach 435mm

There are only two models in the Specialized Stumpy Evo 29 range — the bike you see here and its more expensive, carbon stablemate (page 101). Hardly a 'range' at all then, but last year this model won our 29er trail bike shootout and went on to take the title of 2014 **mbr** Bike of the Year, so why change it? Specialized hasn't — at least not the fundamentals, such as the frame and suspension — but things move quickly in the bike industry, and more importantly so does the competition.

So, whereas the Evo tag on the Stumpy once marked it out as special, with its extra travel, lower and slacker geometry, fatter tyres and a short stem and wide bar, these features are now the norm on most modern trail bikes, which is probably why Specialized no longer offers a non-Evo Stumpy here in the UK.

SUSPENSION

The Stumpy Evo comes with the cheapest fork on test, but for 2015 RockShox has modified the 140mm-travel Revelation RC 29 so it can be tuned with black, Bottomless Tokens. To fit inside the 32mm fork legs, these are slightly smaller than the red ones used in the Pike, but they do the same job. Although two are fitted as standard, we'd recommend trying the full complement (five in total) and working back from there. That's because the fork still dives too easily on steep stuff with the stock set-up, and while you can prop the fork up by adding more air pressure, you lose a lot of the suppleness as a result.

With more tokens and less pressure, the fork rides higher but retains its sensitivity, which helps offset the steeper head angle.

Out back is a Fox CTD Evolution series shock delivering 135mm of travel. It features Specialized's AutoSag valve, which considerably simplifies the process of achieving optimum sag. And while reaching the shock to swap between modes is a stretch on the Canyon and Cube, being tucked neatly underneath the top tube means it couldn't be easier to select Climb, Trail or Descend on the Specialized.

COMPONENTS

The Stumpy comes with Specialized's in-house Command Post and, while it's true that any dropper is better than no dropper, this one is definitely a notch down from the RockShox Reverb. The post has three pre-set positions, but we found it often bypassed the middle setting and we'd have to raise the post to guide it in. It's cable-operated too, so also needs regular maintenance to prevent it seizing. Stopping duties are now taken care of by Shimano's excellent Deore brakes and the wheels have been shored up too, with the internal rim width increasing from 23mm to 30mm for extra strength.

PERFORMANCE

A year ago, we rode the Stumpy Evo straight out of the box, pausing only to set the sag and make a couple of positional tweaks before rattling out a 50km ride. This year we've had to do a bit more prep — replacing the stem with a 50mm while ditching the fatter grips (both consequences of upsizing to a large frame).

Our first ride involved launching straight into a jump trail, and the Stumpy Evo was totally unfazed. There are few bikes that inspire confidence so quickly, and even fewer

that boast its turn of speed on twisty, tight singletrack. With its low bottom bracket and compliant suspension, it rails corners, encouraging you ride harder and faster. It's more active than the Cube and Canyon when climbing, but the suspension doesn't rob you of energy. Instead, the Stumpy Evo just seems to make riding easier.

The only glitch is that the suspension was a bit uneven on the rocky slabs and boulder-strewn descents of BikePark Wales. It felt impatient at the back, eager to push ahead, but the fork kept getting knocked back and hanging up, which also led to some numbness and arm-pump. Given the Stumpy's need for speed, it really is crying out for a better fork.

VERDICT

Last year, the 2014 Stumpy Evo was the best trail bike on test — great handling with a great spec — but this time round the superior attire of the Cube and Canyon take away some of its lustre. It's not that they're better bikes, it's just we have to ask how Cube has managed to come up with an absolutely blinding spec for the same price?

Despite the cheaper build, the Stumpy Evo is still a notch or two above its rivals in terms of ride quality, and it also has the most potential because, unlike poor geometry or lacklustre rear suspension, the fork and spec are easily upgraded.

9

HIGHS

Supple suspension,
excellent balance,
sorted position
and handling

TEST
WINNER!

mbr

LOWS

The RockShox
Revelation is no
match for the
rear

Fox CTD Evolution shock
has 135mm of travel and
three easy-to-access modes

Shimano Deore disc
brakes provide assured,
dependable stopping

Cable-operated Command
Post has tendency to skip
its middle height setting

Conclusion

When we start a test we usually have a checklist of things we think a bike should have, and for a 140mm-travel 29er trail bike costing £2,500 that means a dropper post, quality suspension fork, lightweight wheels and a well-built aluminium frame.

We also have a checklist when it comes to performance. This isn't something you can tell by looking at a spec sheet, it's an overall picture of how the bike rides in certain situations — was it good at cornering? Was it fast on the climbs? The list goes on.

We then marry the two together and weigh up the positives and negatives. The aim is to build up an impression of what the bike is like and how it's positioned relative to the other bikes in the test before we dish out the final ratings.

It sounds clear-cut, but sometimes a bike turns up that has cheap bits on it, and weighs a ton, but rides great. Alternatively it can have absolutely the best specification ever, but ride like a dog.

We also have a bias at **mbr** when it comes to rating bikes; we tend to value ride quality over specification, which means the bikes that ride well do better in our tests. Why? Because they are more fun to ride, which, ultimately, is what mucking about on bikes is all about. Very occasionally we get both; a great build and amazing performance. They're the bikes that get 10 out of 10.

In this test, the Cube and Canyon are examples of bikes that are dressed to the nines — Reverb dropper post, Pike fork, Guide brakes, DT Swiss wheels, you name it — but both bikes have issues with their geometry and suspension. The Cube is too short and tall, and has lacklustre suspension, while a high BB and a lack of suspension stability count against the Canyon.

Those criticisms can't be levelled at the Stumpy, but it's fair to say it does get its ass kicked here in terms of specification. In almost every department it plays second fiddle to the Cube and Canyon, and the upshot is you'll probably end up replacing some of the parts, sooner. Then again, we suspect you'll be a riding it a lot more as well!

The Stumpjumper Evo wins this test because it's one of the best trail bikes ever produced. It's not the best spec'd though, which should give other manufacturers hope. If Cube and Canyon can sort out their issues with geometry and suspension, we could easily be looking at a reshuffle of a long-established pecking order.

The Stumpy Evo is one of the best trail bikes ever produced



The Stumpy may not boast the best spec but its ability is far from modest

RANGE FINDER

Our test winner's stablemates

SPECIALIZED STUMPJUMPER FSR EXPERT CARBON EVO 29

£4,600

Oddly there are only two 29in-wheeled Stumpy Evo models but three 650b bikes. This limits your choice, but if you do decide to upgrade, the Expert Carbon Evo is a real beauty. A carbon main frame, internally routed Command Post, 140mm-travel RockShox Pike RC 29 fork and a Performance Series Fox Float CTD shock are just some of the improvements. It also gets a SRAM X01 11-speed drivetrain and Roval Traverse Fattie wheels for added stability. It's a lot of cash, but it's wanting for nothing.



SPECIALIZED STUMPJUMPER FSR COMP EVO 650B

£2,500

Apart from different sized wheels, the 650b version of our test bike has an identical build: same RockShox Revelation fork, same SRAM 2x drivetrain, same components. It actually uses the same front end as the 29er too — Specialized has just bolted it to a 650b back end. The knock-on effect is that the BB is way too low and the front end too tall. When we tested it in the June 2014 issue, we struggled to get enough weight over the front end and we constantly clipped the pedals.

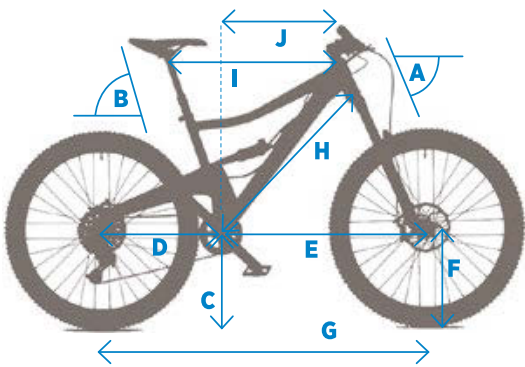


BB height: how low can you go?

Although it's difficult to isolate one measurement and say it's responsible for the way a bike rides, the issue with the Canyon's shock did illustrate how important a low bottom bracket height is to handling. At BikePark Wales, the Spectral AL 9.9 had a broken shock but it

resulted in the BB being 20mm lower than normal and it absolutely railed corners. This is because the heaviest bit (you) is much lower, and that increases stability. There is a limiting factor though, because if the BB is too low you will hit your pedals on the ground.

Obviously there are other factors in the geometry, and the suspension plays a massive role in determining how a bike rides, but generally speaking a bike with a low BB tends to perform better than one with a high one.



- A Head angle
- B Seat angle
- C BB height
- D Chainstay
- E Front centre
- F Wheelbase
- G Down tube
- H Top tube
- I Reach

Canyon	Cube	Specialized
68.1°	68°	68.3°
69.3°	71.2°	69.5°
340mm	335mm	335mm
450mm	450mm	455mm
730mm	730mm	720mm
1,180mm	1,180mm	1,175mm
715mm	715mm	725mm
619mm	599mm	622mm
439mm	424mm	435mm

SPECIFICATION

This month's bikes at a glance

Make/model	Canyon Spectral AL 9.9	Cube Stereo 140 HPC Race 29	Specialized Stumpjumper FSR Comp EVO 29
Price	£2,549	£2,499	£2,500
Weight	14.34kg (31.6lb)	13.85kg (30.5lb)	14.37kg (31.7lb)
Contact	canyon.com	cube.eu/uk	specialized.com
FRAME			
Sizes	S, M, L, XL	16, 18, 20, 22in	S, M, L, XL, XXL
Size tested	L	20in	L
Frame material	Spectral 29 aluminium	HPC Carbon/6061 aluminium	M5 aluminium
Suspension fork	RockShox Pike RCT3 Solo Air	RockShox Pike RC Solo Air	RockShox Revelation RC Solo Air
Rear shock	Cane Creek (DBInline)	Fox Float CTD Performance	Fox Float CTD Evo w/AutoSag
Front travel	130mm	140mm	140mm
Rear travel	130mm	140mm	135mm
WHEELS			
Hubs	DT Swiss XM 1501 Spline 15/142mm	DT Swiss 15/142mm	Specialized HiLo 15/142mm
Rims	DT Swiss XM 1501	DT Swiss AM 3.9	Roval Traverse Fattie
Spokes	DT Swiss	DT Swiss	DT Swiss
Tyres	Continental Mtn King II/X-King 29x2.4in	Schwalbe Hans Dampf 29x2.35in	Specialized Butcher Control/Slaughter 29x2.3in
GROUPSET			
Shifters	SRAM XO 2x10	SRAM X9 2x10	SRAM X7 2x10
Front mech	SRAM XO	SRAM XO	SRAM X7
Rear mech	SRAM XO Type II	SRAM XO Type II	SRAM X9 Type II
Crank	SRAM XO 36/22t	SRAM XO 36/22t	SRAM S-1250 36/22t
Bottom bracket	SRAM PressFit GXP	SRAM PressFit GXP	SRAM PF30
Brakes	SRAM Guide RS	SRAM Guide R	Shimano Deore
Rotor sizes	200/180mm	180/180mm	200/180mm
COMPONENTS			
Saddle	Ergon SME230	Selle Italia X1 Trail	Body Geometry Henge Comp
Seatpost	RockShox Reverb Stealth 100mm	RockShox Reverb Stealth 125mm	Command Post Blacklite 125mm
Handlebar	Canyon 13 Flat AL 740mm	Race Face Ride 740mm	Specialized mini rise 750mm
Stem	Canyon V12 50/60/70mm	Race Face Evolve 70mm	Specialized XC 70mm
Rating			



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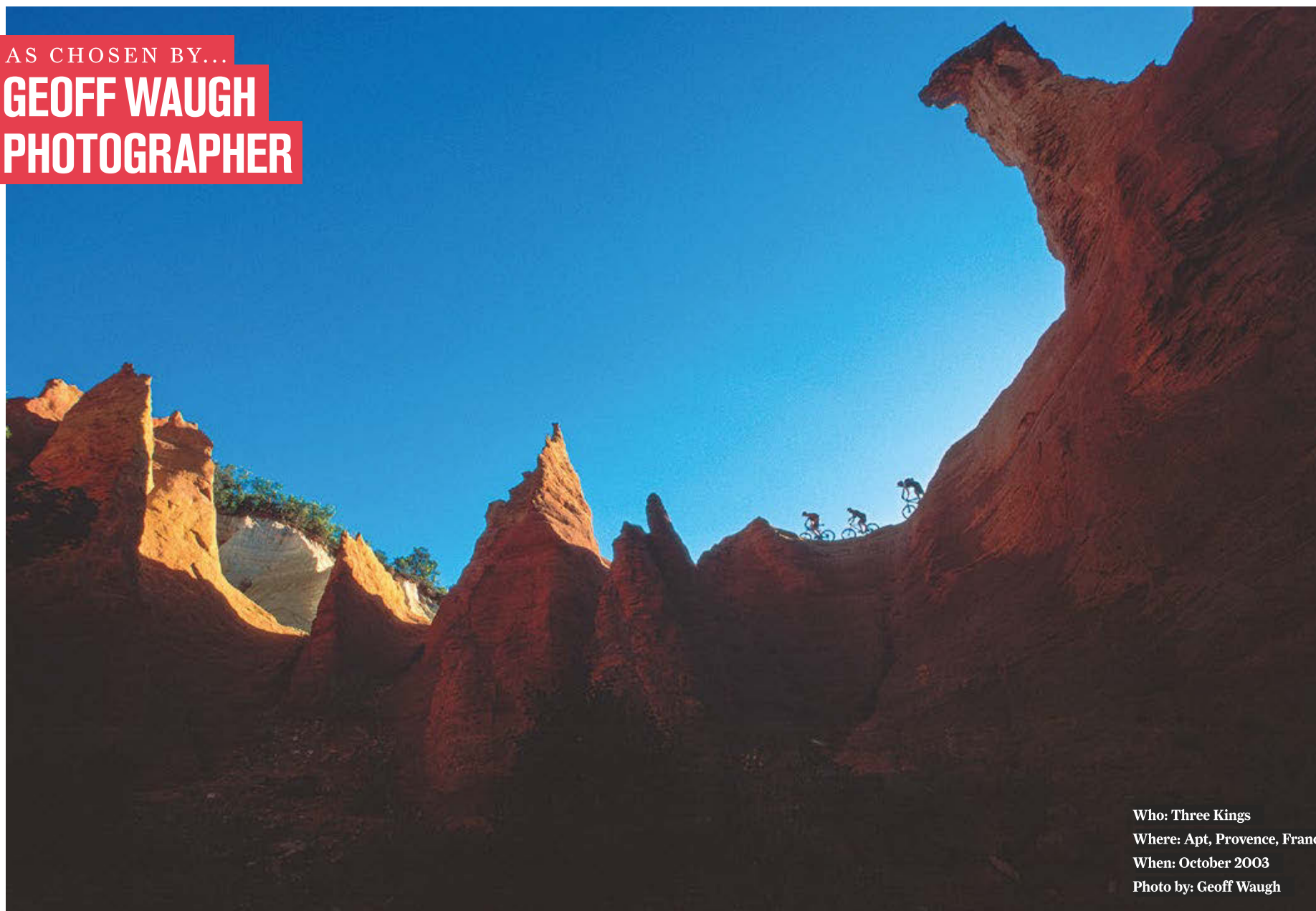
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AS CHOSEN BY...

**GEOFF WAUGH
PHOTOGRAPHER**



Who: Three Kings
Where: Apt, Provence, France
When: October 2003
Photo by: Geoff Waugh



Geoff Waugh, three times winner of the David Worthy Award. Potential 29er rider. Possible rider of 27.5ers.

This is not necessarily the best image I have ever taken, but it certainly comes with stories and that is what really counts. The picture shows former **mbr** editor John Kitchener and writer Tom Locke, along with Paul Burwell, on a ridge of sandstone in the area known as Le Mini-Colorado. To most, it is a place of scenic beauty, but to others it's a location for mtb and moto-cross video shoots! We had to see it, so it was tagged on to a trip to the Roc d'Azur event in the south of France, despite being a two-hour drive away.

We were shooting a bike test and, having got all the close-ups, I looked up and saw the potential: bluebird sky, orange and red rocks and silhouettes. I rounded the troops up — and boom! In the proverbial bag.

The image appeared as a 'Big Picture' in this magazine, then I had a print made to enter it into the Sports Photographer of the Year competition. This is the national sports

journalists' event and the one to win. I went to my lab to pick the print up and my friend who worked there asked if I was going to the awards night. "Of course," I replied. But, of course, I didn't. The only excuse I could muster was that it was south of the river. Weak. Turned out I won the cycling category — my mate had been trying to give me a heavy hint; he had produced the prints for the competition, so already knew the winners. I was a little put out.

Still, the category I won was the 'David Worthy Memorial' award for cycling

photography. David was a colleague who was killed during the Kellogg's Tour, where I too was working, when his motorcycle was involved in a collision. It was an honour to have won the award. It also taught me to attend more functions.

I called the image 'We Three Kings' because of the composition and the desert-like colours. People often ask if these images were shot in Utah or the Middle East. Nope! It's all there under our noses, and once again it's mountain biking that shows us the way.

**I looked up and saw the potential:
bluebird sky, orange and red rocks and
silhouettes. Boom! It was in the bag**

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